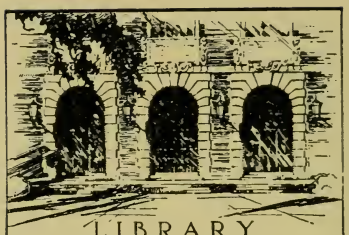

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THE MAN SHE CARED FOR

BY

F. W. ROBINSON

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY,"

"NO CHURCH,"

ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BOOK THE THIRD.

THE MISTRESS OF ILVERCOMBE.

(CONTINUED.)

THE MAN SHE CARED FOR.

CHAPTER XXX.

ON THE HIGH-ROAD.

HAMILTON REDCLOVE, with that supreme contempt for the minor weaknesses of humanity befitting a young man with a tolerably good opinion of himself and his general abilities, had never acknowledged to such a trifling disorder as 'nerves.' His nerves, he believed, he had had always completely under his own control; he had borne trouble well, disappointment well, even Dan Overdown and his revelations tolerably well, till the last three minutes of their interview, when he had certainly given way

just a trifle; but to jump like a nervous girl at the sight of a stranger at his elbow, and to be inclined to cry out in his astonishment, was an aggravating fact to him, when he had fully recovered from his surprise.

'Who are you, sir? What do you want with me?' he asked, very sharply.

'I am sorry I have scared you,' said the stranger, apologetically; 'it was not my intention, I assure you.'

'I am not scared,' Hamilton answered; 'I was unprepared for you, that's all. What do you want prowling about the lanes at this time of night, may I ask?'

The man laughed at the peremptory tones in which he was addressed; laughed, not unpleasantly, though there was a ring almost of opposition, or of defiance, in the midst of his hilarity.

'Do the Warwickshire lanes belong to you, sir, that you resent my right to walk along them?' was the quiet inquiry following the laugh.

'I only resent your right to force your com-

panionship upon me,' said Hamilton. 'Good-evening.'

'Stay a moment,' and here the stranger touched Hamilton's arm again, 'you're a peppery mortal, I should say; but you must not leave a fellow all of a hurry in this dead-and-alive quarter, without giving him the information he requires. In my country we are only too willing to help a man on his road, and put him in the right track.'

'What information do you want of me?' asked Hamilton.

'I have lost my way, and you are a native of these parts, who can set me straight again,' replied the stranger.

'I am not a native of these parts.'

'What, are you lost, too? And is that why you were cursing and swearing, and denouncing the elements?' cried the man; 'well, that's an odd coincidence enough.'

'I am not lost,' snapped Hamilton. 'Where do you want to go?'

'To a place called Ilvercombe.'

'Mrs. Dangerfield's?'

'Exactly.'

'Where have you come from?'

'Mr. Fayre's—the parson's.'

'You?'

'Yes, he put me in the right way, an hour or so ago, but it's got all wrong again somehow.'

Hamilton looked more keenly and critically at the stranger, but the man was difficult to make out, with the collar of his great-coat turned up above his ears, and with the snow upon him, thick and white. The stranger was tall, and probably young—that was all Hamilton could make of him, peer as hard as he might. Who could he be wandering thus helplessly about the high road, and trying to discover Ilvercombe?

'It's a late hour for a visit to Mrs. Dangerfield,' commented Hamilton.

'Oh! that does not matter,' said the man; 'there are those who would be very glad to see me.'

'Indeed!'

'At least, I hope so. A man never knows for

certain when he's welcome,' he added, lightly; 'and it's easy to turn tail again, if out of one's reckoning.'

'Mrs. Dangerfield will be asleep by this time,' commented Hamilton.

'Possibly. Never mind about that; which is the way to her house?'

'You are going in the wrong direction, I think,' said Hamilton, 'but I don't quite know where I am myself. Let me consider a minute.'

'Take your time. I am in no hurry.'

'That's fortunate.'

The stranger looked keenly and critically at Hamilton now, as at a being who puzzled him in turn, and Hamilton strode on with full liberty to reflect on the position. He was not quite satisfied with it, and yet he was not suspicious of this stranger, whose manner was too outspoken, he believed, to indicate any nefarious design. The stranger was almost anxious to let people know where he was going, and with what object. Some sea-faring man—one of the servants' sweethearts from abroad possibly,

and coming home with his heart in the right place—that is, where he had left it, in some other faithful heart's perhaps. A second Daniel come to judgment—another Daniel Overdown, and with the same purpose in his mind. What devoted lads and lasses there were about this part of Warwickshire, Hamilton thought—'something in the air' encouraging to universal fidelity, he supposed; and then he kicked the snow before him savagely, and brushed the drift from his eyelashes and the tip of his nose, and looked round to make sure where his wanderings had led him. When he was almost sure in which direction he was, and before he could impart the requisite amount of information to his companion, the other said, quietly and quaintly, and with a perfect frankness that Hamilton Redclove might, under other circumstances, have been induced to admire,

'Have you been drinking at all?'

'Drinking! No. What on earth makes you think I have been drinking?'

'Your pardon for the inquiry,' was the calm

observation, 'but I thought you were screwed when I first came up with you.'

Hamilton reflected for a moment, then said,

'*Screwed!* Indeed!'

'It's a bitter night to be walking about with a straw hat on the back of your head, and that jaunty jacket loose and unbuttoned. That's all,' was the explanation proffered.

Hamilton clapped his hand to his head at this, and found, to his amazement, that he had come out in his landlord's summer straw-hat, which he had snatched at blindly from the pegs in the passage, before he had dashed into the night, gasping for fresh air.

'We don't study dress in this part of the country,' said Hamilton, by way of hurried explanation, 'and the night isn't at all cold to me.'

'Thundering hot, I should say, in your opinion,' was the dry remark of the stranger.

'And your road lies to the left here,' Hamilton said, significantly.

'Oh! thank you. How far is it to Ilvercombe now?'

'Two or three miles.'

'Thank you again, governor,' said his companion, 'and good-night.'

He strode away at an increased rate of progression, like a man who, once set upon his right road, would make up by extra rapidity for the time he had lost.

Hamilton started at the last words, and at the tone in them. He had surely heard that voice before, he thought for an instant, and it belonged to a time of doubt and difficulty, when he was as dissatisfied with life and its surroundings as he was at that moment!

The man did not notice that Hamilton had come to a full stop, and was looking after him through the lines of snow-flakes; he had not recognised Hamilton, or dreamed of meeting him in Warwickshire, or thought him anything but a young villager very 'hot in the copper,' from incessant potations at the 'Lion,' and taking his 'cooler' on his way home through the storm. He was too full of Ilvercombe to let Hamilton Redclove's demeanour oppress his mind in any way—in a few more minutes he had completely forgotten him.

He went on whistling softly to himself, with his head inclined a little forward to keep the snow as much as possible from his face, a man whom a storm did not disconcert, but rather put into excellent spirits. He did not miss his way again; Ilvercombe was on somewhat higher ground, he had been told, and as the road sloped upwards he felt he was on the right path. Presently he had reached the high brick wall which separated Mrs. Dangerfield's mansion from the main road, and he kept to this till he came to the great gates and the lodge-keeper's house, where a light was burning. He rang the lodge bell very softly, and an old man came shuffling out in the snow to peer at him through the iron bars.

'Who are you? What do you want?' piped forth the lodge-keeper.

'Is this Mrs. Dangerfield's?'

'It is.'

'Is she at home?'

'She's not likely to be out, I should say.'

'Let me in, then, old man—and look sharp about it.'

'Mrs. Dangerfield cannot expect you at this hour of the night,' said the old man, dubiously; 'that is not very likely.'

'I never said she did. It is Miss Challis whom I have come to see.'

'What, now?'

The lodge-keeper was still doubtful, and the stranger was not anxious to explain the true nature of his mission to this old gentleman, any more than he had been too communicative to the party in the straw-hat, whom he had met careering about the road like a lunatic. He remembered *him* again as the lodge-keeper felt disposed to extemporise a whole catechism of questions.

'I have come from Mr. Fayre's,' he said, after a pause.

He thought that the vicar's name was a good passport, and would carry him through, as it did.

'From Mr. Fayre's! Oh! I see,' said the lodge-keeper; 'nothing wrong, I hope, at the vicarage, young man?'

'No—nothing wrong.'

The gates were unfastened, and the lodge-keeper said, more civilly,

'Do you know the way?'

'To be sure.'

'I don't seem to remember you at Mr. Fayre's—I——' the old man said, but the traveller was through the gates and walking briskly along the broad carriage-drive away from him before the sentence could be completed.

The visitor trudged on, and the snow was deeper and thicker here, with not a footprint to mar its surface till his coming at that hour. He went off the track once but returned to it, and presently he became aware of the big block of house-building looming in front of him draped with snow, and with never a light that he could see in all the long line of sombreness before him.

'Early folk, and gone to roost,' he muttered. 'I hope not. I don't want to go back just yet, not till I have seen her.'

He was close to the entrance-door, and his hand was raised to announce his presence without, when he paused and drew back, as

though a fresh thought had occurred to him.

One more survey of the house, as if interested in its architecture, even in the darkness; then he went back a few more steps, and tramped along the garden terrace, which ran along the whole extent of the mansion, and was continued on the garden front.

He walked the full extent of the terrace, turned, and then proceeded calmly onwards. At the back of the house he paused again for an instant, for there was a light streaming from more than one window across the snow, and here were signs of humanity at last.

To the long, narrow window nearest him, where the tracery of the frame-work was thrown upon the snow, like a shadow-pattern there, the man went very cautiously.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FROM THE PAST.

THAT particular evening was scarcely spent more agreeably by our characters at Ilvercombe, than by the two gentlemen whom we have heard in sharp discussion at the 'Lion' at Grayling.

Agnes Challis did not find any great harmony prevailing at the house upon her return; dulness and deep thought, and much absence of real life, were the characteristics of the place, she perceived. The vicar had gone back to his daughter, and there were only the Dangerfields left to welcome her; and they did not welcome her in the least. The old lady was steeped in

dulness, to begin with; she sat heaped in her chair, a lay figure of unprepossessing appearance, disinclined to speak, and disposed to resent the liberty of anyone speaking to her. She looked under her brows at Agnes, as our heroine came into the drawing-room, but no word of greeting or welcome escaped her; and when Agnes stooped, kissed her on the cheek, and asked if she were well, the answer in return was very far from satisfactory.

'I feel worse than I have ever done in my life,' she replied.

'Let me send for a doctor——' began Agnes, when she interrupted her.

'It will not be the doctors, but the keepers of the madhouse, when anybody is wanted for me,' she said, indignantly.

'What has happened whilst I have been away to disturb you?'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield did not reply, and Aggie glanced towards the widow and Estelle for any explanation they might feel disposed to offer. But the widow was painfully attentive to a piece of wool-work in her lap, and Estelle regarded

her so stolidly that she felt the old love and confidence that had been so impulsively displayed, was as impulsively withdrawn. She could not guess the reason yet, though it was already suggested to her mind; she knew that Hamilton Redclove's movements had engendered distrust of him and her, and she was too proud to attempt to explain that—too weary herself of the day's excitement to tell the whole story, and leave them to decide whether it reflected upon her disparagingly or exonerated her from blame. And whose business was it save her own?—who had a right in that house, or beyond it, to regulate her actions and call her to account for them?—by what law of injustice did they condemn her in their own narrow judgment and their shallow estimate of her character? She was tired of them and of their little jealous world; let her get back to the place she had given up for them as soon as she could; her sphere was not theirs; her thoughts were not theirs either. It would be better to get away.

'You have been harassed, I fear,' Agnes

whispered to the old lady; 'if there is anything I can do to help you out of trouble, or anything I can say, you may command me.'

The wasted hand stole forth slowly from many wrappings, and put itself in that of Aggie's.

'Presently,' she murmured; then she looked towards her who had made such an unhappy match of it with her son.

'Frances, play something. For Heaven's sake put that horrible wool-work down!' she cried, petulantly.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield walked across to the piano, and commenced a Mass in D forthwith. She was obedient to the old lady's commands that evening; she did everything without a murmur, but she was singularly quiet over it all, and Estelle was equally frigid to match. The daughter had gone back with wonderful quickness to her old demeanour, the faint copy of her mother which she had always been to the ordinary observer, although not to Hamilton Redclove or to Aggie Challis.

When the Mass was completed, and the com-

pany, by several degrees, still further depressed, the servants brought round tea, which was anything but a festive meal on that occasion. There were a few faint efforts made to promote a certain amount of conversation, but they were dead failures. Young Mrs. Dangerfield attempted, in a flabby fashion, to draw out her mother-in-law, who prudently declined to be drawn out, and to address her daughter on various topics, which elicited only monosyllables in response; she even threw in a word or two, and, with an expression that seemed to convey that they were under protest, to Agnes Challis, whose answers were vague in consequence. Something had surely happened during her absence from Ilvercombe, thought Aggie, to account for this general taciturnity—surely, it was not her fault, or in any way connected with her?

She was glad when the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield and her daughter rose to withdraw, at an hour much earlier than usual; she was not hurt at the widow's stately bow and graver 'Good evening, Miss Challis,' and even Estelle's

frigid repetition of the salutation did not wound her in any great degree. She would await the explanation at a future period—the old lady might make it, or, presently, Estelle—till then there was nothing to excite her; of the inconsistencies and variabilities of life she had had in her time—in her mother's time—much sad experience.

Frances Dangerfield and daughter passed out of the room, Estelle saying, at the door, 'I think of sharing mamma's room to-night,' more for the edification of the old lady than for our heroine, who turned to the fire with a sad little smile that did not, however, betray any mortification of spirit. Bending towards the blazing coal, and gazing into its depths, formed, though she knew it not, a companion picture to the man at the 'Lion' inn, with whose thoughts hers crossed strangely at that period.

'Well—haven't you anything to ask me?' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, querulously, at last; 'or are you going to be as aggravating as the rest of them?'

'Pardon me; I had fallen into thought.'

'What have you to think about, I wonder, and to give you such a miserable expression as that?' inquired the old lady.

'Was it miserable?'

'Very.'

Agnes laughed a little tremulously.

'A girl should not have a fit of "the blues," grandmamma, at her first offer of marriage, should she?'

'He *has* offered to marry you, then!' cried old Mrs. Dangerfield, beginning to shake a little at the intelligence.

'He will to-morrow morning,' was the reply. 'He has given me fair warning that he will call with that intention.'

'They were right, and I was wrong, after all,' muttered the old lady. 'They understand this new-fangled world better than I—and all the follies, and vanities, and paltry schemings with which it is full. It is beyond my time. It wasn't so when I was young.'

'What was not?' asked Agnes.

'This paltry disguise of feeling—this affectation of indifference—masking only passion and

intrigue in men and women, who might, with credit to them, act more honestly. I say it was not so, when I was young,' cried Mrs. Dangerfield, with great excitement.

Agnes Challis drew her chair closer to the speaker, and took the withered hands, not without resistance, in her own.

'You are doing me an injustice, if you refer to me,' she said.

'I am deceived in you.'

'Because an old friend hints that he wishes me to become his wife—that, despite the past, he sees his only happiness in me?'

'Hamilton Redclove had no right to say that to you.'

'Hamilton Redclove,' said Aggie, in only half surprise, for she had half-guessed the misconstruction which had been put upon her words, and had been womanly and curious enough to attempt to sound to the depths; 'I am speaking of Daniel Overdown, of Birmingham?'

'WHAT!'

Agnes Challis repeated her statement.

'You were speaking of Daniel Overdown,' muttered the old lady.

'Of my old friend and protector—my hard-headed, soft-hearted, conceited, obstinate guardian, Dan Overdown,' repeated Aggie; 'what has Mr. Hamilton Redclove to do with me?'

'Did you not meet Mr. Redclove by appointment this morning?'

'No, by accident.'

'He escorted you to Grayling.'

'He came half-way with me; then Mr. Daniel Overdown met us.'

'Where has Hamilton been all day?' inquired Mrs. Dangerfield.

'I have not the slightest idea. I thought he had come back to this house.

'He has not been here,' said the old lady; 'and you and he have not been together since this morning?'

'No.'

'I knew I was right,' said old Mrs. Dangerfield, triumphantly; 'kiss me, Aggie, and forgive me for thinking for awhile, perhaps, that you were keeping me in the dark. I am not

suspicious, but Frances Dangerfield and that silly Estelle are—both of them. In some respects, my child,' she added, confidentially, 'they are a couple of cats. They are hard to please and easy to pain, and I shall not be sorry when they leave Ilvercombe.'

'Not on my account,' answered Aggie, very positively and proudly: 'I must be no object of dispute, here or elsewhere. If they cannot think me honest and fair-dealing, leave it to time to clear me, rather than take my part against their prejudices. I am not afraid of the result, grandmamma.'

She bowed her forehead on the other's bosom, and a tear or two escaped her, which the old woman did not perceive.

'I have fought your battle already—I have spoken out pretty plainly,' said Mrs. Dangerfield, with great significance, 'but Frances thought there was a secret understanding between you and her cousin Hamilton.'

'Oh!'

'That you were love-making on the sly,' she continued.

'Did she say that before Estelle?'

'Yes; she was more angry than I have seen her lately, and did not mind what she said. Perhaps it was for Estelle's sake, and to shake her out of that foolish dream of hers.'

'And Estelle did not defend me—did not take my part in any way—did not tell her mother what I had already told her about Hamilton Redclove?' inquired Estelle, hastily.

'Estelle has hardly spoken a word all day.'

'Poor Estelle, so easily taught to discredit the actions of those who try their best for her, even if they fail,' said Agnes, thoughtfully.

'And to be taught so by a mother. Well, well—I pity them both though. Poor women—poor women!'

Agnes resumed her former position to regard old Mrs. Dangerfield more closely—more keenly—as with the consciousness of one who possessed a clue to the thoughts passing in the other's mind. Mrs. Dangerfield paused, and made a sudden dash back to the old topic, and Aggie did not attempt to check her.

'But you are not going to accept this

Daniel Overdown, child?' was the sudden inquiry.

'I cannot refuse him.'

'You cannot?'

'No.'

'You really mean to say you will promise to-morrow to become his wife—before you know your own mind?'

'I think I shall promise,' answered Aggie, a faint reserve at the last moment asserting itself in spite of her.

This was the dangerous ground of comment on which Hamilton had intruded and got himself snubbed earlier that day, but Aggie Challis did not consider the present speaker's remarks in the same way, it was evident.

'Yes—he is. He knows me and my life. And he loves me.'

'Do you love him?'

Agnes drew a deep long breath very quickly. She did not know—she could not say now—all her life of late days had become confused and involved, and nothing was as it had been before she had left the vicarage. Did she love Dan

Overdown, of Prosser Street?—was the contemplation of life with him the one bright spot shining through the clouds that had shut her in so long?—was happiness to come with his love for her, his trust in her, or to come never in her life?

'Yes, in my own way, after my own fashion, I believe I love him,' she confessed, slowly, 'not as women love men in novels, but with much gratitude and truth. I am aware of his faults; I see where they may clash with mine—but I know the sterling gold in his heart better than anyone else does, and I would not be the cause of any unhappiness to him for all that the world could offer me.'

'You think too much of what he has done for you.'

'You do not know how noble and unselfish he has been.'

'You are more so, if you think of becoming his wife because he took care of you when you were young, and helpless, and suspected—and not because you love him. He has no right to exact as much from you, and I will tell him so

to-morrow,' cried Mrs. Dangerfield, with considerable animation.

'No, no. If you do, I will return to Grayling at once; I will have no go-betweens. I will answer him of my own free-will, and without anybody's interference,' cried Aggie, passionately.

'You have made up your mind, I see,' said the old lady, with a heavy sigh. 'It's a great pity, and it is in too much haste.'

'*He* is in a hurry—not I,' answered Aggie, faintly smiling again; 'he is afraid of losing me if he delay any longer. As if I were likely to marry any man save he who knows my life, and judges it correctly.'

'I had a hope it would be this Hamilton Redclove—some day,' said the other.

'You had!' exclaimed Aggie.

'Yes, I had.'

'Is it possible?'

'He does not love Estelle; he seeks you out—your position some day will be——'

'Don't say any more,' cried Aggie, interrupting her; 'he is a lord's nephew, and I am a

ticket-of-leave woman! There is the social distinction which nothing can set aside, even if we were so unfortunately foolish—which is impossible—as to take a fancy to each other. Even if he went down to beggary, and you left me rich as Crœsus in your weak attempt at restitution.'

The old lady covered her face with her hands, and gave a low, long cry. The instant afterwards the hands were drawn down into her lap and held there tightly by her companion, and the fair face of Agnes Challis was resting close to hers.

'There, there, don't mind what I said just now,' Aggie murmured. 'You are sorry for a past which is not worth alluding to, and I am learning slowly to forget it and forgive it. I have been excited, and said strange things to-day. May I go to my room?'

'Yes, child, yes.'

'Good-night, grandmamma. I call you by that name when no one is by, although sometimes I think it jars upon you.'

'It is a name I love to hear you whisper to

me,' was the reply. 'Good-night. God bless you, Agnes.'

As the old lady kissed her, both women were startled not a little by the sudden clashing of a hasty hand upon the window-panes without. Aggie sprang back with some alarm, and then, full of a new courage, rushed to the heavy curtains and dragged them aside from the window. There was the night beyond, and the hurrying lines of snow-drift crossing and re-crossing it, and a tall man standing without, as if waiting for admittance. Agnes could see his face pressed closely to the glass.

'What are you doing in the grounds? What do you want? Who are you?' Agnes called forth, quickly.

The third question only met with a response.

'I am Sam Challis,' was the answer.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BROTHER.

'I AM Sam Challis!'

A voice from the grave could not have startled the listeners more than that announcement. And it was as if from the grave of the buried past it spoke to one of them.

'Sam! back again, and—here!' ejaculated Aggie; then with slow, cautious steps she approached the window more closely, and looked through at him. The old woman had turned round in her chair, and was glaring in the same direction, as at a ghost for which she had been waiting.

The man standing in the snow looked as

eagerly into the room, as for some one whom he wished to recognise, and the light fell upon him with distinctness, leaving Aggie in the shadow.

'It is my brother,' said she to her grandmother, 'I may admit him?'

'He may rob and murder us,' whispered the old lady, 'he never bore a good character—we know nothing of him.'

'Will you let me answer for him?' said Aggie, with her hand upon the lock of the casement.

'You are not afraid?'

'No, madam. He is not here to harm us.'

'How can you be sure?'

'I feel sure that this is one friend come back to me. Otherwise, he would have stayed away.'

'I dread him,' murmured the old lady, clasping her hands together in suspense, 'I fear to meet him. Let me get away before he enters. Please, let me get away!'

She half-rose to quit the room, then she glanced once more towards the window, stopped and sank back in her chair.

'He may come in,' she said. 'I will see it out with you.'

Aggie did not wait for her companion to change her mind again; she drew back the bolt of the French window, which she pushed outwards to the night. The man stamped the snow from his feet before he entered, advanced to Aggie and put his arms around her, straining her with much rough ardour to his breast. He had recognised her even with her face in shadow, the tall, graceful figure was the same, she was a young woman when he had seen her last at Liverpool, and time had not changed her to him—she was as he had hoped to find her, and he was grateful for the discovery which once more linked their lives together. It was he who had changed—not Aggie Challis. Standing in the full light, it was easy to perceive that time had changed him for the better, and difficult to associate him with the half-starved, ragged waif whom we have seen shivering in the streets of Liverpool. He was a tall, well-dressed man, with a bronzed, healthy face, and with only the keen outlook from it to remind

one of his past—the quick, almost watchful glance which had characterised him when policemen were lurking at street corners, ready to be 'down upon him' at any moment, if he were not prepared to dodge them. He had grown a good-looking young fellow, too, and there was a bright smile on his face which no one had seen hitherto, save Aggie, when he was a boy at home, and cared for home a little. And, above all, he was so wondrously like the picture in the dining-room that it was the first thought of the two women when greetings had been exchanged, and he was sitting down, hat in hand, between them.

'To think I am back again with you,' were his first words after releasing Aggie from his embrace, 'to think I have found you!'

He looked very attentively, very inquisitively, at the old lady in the chair, and Aggie said, by way of introduction,

'This is Mrs. Dangerfield of Ilvercombe, who has been very kind to me.'

'I have heard so already from Mr. Fayre,' answered Sam, 'at whose house I have been

making inquiries after you. Mrs. Dangerfield,' he said, addressing her, 'may the brother of Agnes Challis thank you, as well as his sister.'

'Your sister has been kind to me,' murmured the old woman, sitting now with clasped hands and head averted from him, 'I have done nothing to deserve thanks.'

'You will allow me to take Aggie's word for it—for somehow,' he added, lightly, touching his sister on the shoulder, 'and even at my worst, I had faith in her and no one else. And now, madam,' he added, extending a brown hand towards her with a suddenness that made her shrink from him, 'may your son's son take your hand and say, "peace between us two"?'

He regarded her very earnestly as he spoke: he seemed studying her with grave intentness.

'You do not come here as my enemy?' she asked, almost doubtfully.

'Neither your enemy nor accuser.'

'I never took heed of you when I was well and strong, and might have saved you from the

streets,' she murmured, 'my pride was against all acknowledgment of you.'

'Times have changed, and you and I have changed with them. If my sister is your guest and friend, what have I to offer in return but gratitude?'

'I don't know,' she answered, feebly, 'it is all a dream to me.'

'Don't let me wake you in a hurry, then,' he said, laughing pleasantly, 'don't trust me too soon—I am still Sam Challis.'

He sat with his hand extended still towards her, and she put hers within it after looking at him furtively.

'How like you are to my lost Paul,' she said, 'it is as if the dead were coming back.'

'We will let the dead rest as long as we can,' he replied; 'they are objectionable company to the quick.'

It was somewhat of a harsh reply, but the manner in which it was conveyed robbed it of any sting that it might have possessed, if delivered in another fashion. He seemed at that

time a man brimming over with good temper, and from whom an unkind phrase could not possibly escape.

'Why did you come to the window in so strange a fashion?' Agnes inquired.

'It was the only light I could see shining in this big house,' he replied, 'and I had prowled round it like a wolf before making up my mind to disturb you. Mr. Fayre told me that Mrs. Dangerfield was unwell, and I hesitated at a formal summons at so late an hour. I thought, if I could talk to you quietly to begin with, it would be a better plan,' he added, almost significantly, Aggie thought. 'When I saw the light above the curtains, and the flickering of a fire on the ceiling, I had the instinct that you were here, and I came to the window to listen for your voice, which I felt sure I should remember. And I did; and, impulse getting the master of me, I nearly broke the glass as a start off.'

He laughed again, and Agnes smiled at him in return, rather than at the subject matter of his discourse. He was in high spirits; his discovery of his sister had exhilarated him; he

was a man who took life easily, or with whom life had become a matter of some ease and personal enjoyment. Agnes regarded him as a being whom she hardly understood at present —who had returned to England somewhat of an incomprehensibility, at least a man not quickly to be read.

'You have not told me anything of yourself, Sam,' said his sister; 'what happened at Liverpool? why you did not keep your promise to Mr. Redclove, who had trusted you so generously with his money?'

The light left his face, and he became grave, almost stern, on the instant.

'Ah! what did they all think of me, Aggie?'

'The worst, I am afraid, poor Sam,' was the reply.

'How easy it is to believe the worst,' he said, bitterly; 'how cruel, how infernally uncharitable! And yet we all do it in our turn, and no one escapes the lash but the biggest knave, hiding in the background.'

'You have grown a satirist,' said Aggie.

'I have had a great deal of time in the far

West to think out these little problems,' he answered, laughing again.

'You have been to America?'

'Yes.'

'And have been successful there,' cried Aggie. 'Oh! I am very glad, Sam; you don't know how happy you have made me.'

'Wait a bit,' answered Sam Challis, quickly; 'don't jump to conclusions, or read my story for me. I have not been successful, I have not been wholly unsuccessful. I am not a rich man, but I shall not be poor till I have paid my debts, and set my face homewards.'

'Homewards! To America again?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you were back for good, Sam,' said Agnes.

'That would be for bad,' he added, enigmatically.

She looked at him inquiringly, but he drifted into the old subject without explaining.

'I have come to England with three missions; first, to see you; secondly, to pay back two hundred pounds which I borrowed in Liverpool

of a gentleman whose name I only learn to-day for the first time.'

'I am glad—I am glad,' cried Aggie, beating her hands together in her new delight; 'if it leave you a beggar, Sam, I am very, very proud that you have saved the money, and are here to pay it back.'

'Yes, I shall be proud of that,' was Sam Challis's answer.

'And thirdly,' she asked—'what is the third mission?'

His quick glance passed from his sister to the old woman in the chair, sitting there with eyes distended still, and ears drinking in every word he uttered.

'That is a secret which time will reveal,' he replied, after a moment's silence, 'not I.'

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NOT QUITE UNDERSTOOD.

Old Mrs. Dangerfield looked away from Sam Challis after his last words, and reached a shaking hand towards the bell at her side.

'I am tired,' she murmured; 'I will go to my room when Therese comes, if you will excuse me. Will you remain here to-night?' she asked her grandson, nervously.

'Thank you, no,' answered Sam, 'I have arranged for a room at the inn in the village.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield was evidently relieved in mind by this statement.

'Agnes, lend me your arm upstairs. Therese is long in coming, and I am very weary,' said

Mrs. Dangerfield; 'you will excuse your sister for a few minutes?'

'Certainly,' was the reply. 'But, as it is getting late, perhaps she will excuse me till the morning also. I could not rest until I had seen her; and, having seen her, it will be a rational proceeding to say good-night to both of you.'

'No, Sam,' answered Aggie, 'please wait a little longer.'

'As you will.'

Old Mrs. Dangerfield responded to his good-night, and left the room, leaning upon Aggie's arm. Outside the door they found Therese advancing sleepily and slowly, but the old lady waved her back again.

'You will await me in my room,' she said; and Therese, aroused into a semi-state of bewilderment, stared at her, and then turned.

'I wish to speak to you, Agnes, for a minute, if you will,' said the grandmother.

'I am listening,' replied Aggie.

'All is a mystery concerning him, and he speaks in riddles,' she said, with excitement; 'we must not trust him yet.'

'I can trust him,' answered the sister of the man suspected.

'I hope we both can,' murmured the old lady, 'but the fear is on me that he is here to harm us, and I cannot shake it off to-night.'

'You must not fear my brother—you will not, presently.'

'I trust not. How like to Paul!' she exclaimed, 'how dreadfully like the son whom God took from me!'

They went upstairs together to the door of the old lady's room. Here they stopped. and old Mrs. Dangerfield said,

'Good-night, child.'

'Good-night. grandmamma.'

'You will never be against me, Aggie?'

'Never,' was the answer.

'That comforts me. Good-night once more,' said the grandmother.

They kissed and separated, and Agnes Challis went downstairs to the drawing-room to find it wholly deserted. She was surprised, and, after one glance at the window by which her brother had entered, and the bolt of which was as she

had left it, she passed into the dining-room. Samuel Challis was standing there, with one of the silver candlesticks from the drawing-room in his hand. The light was held up towards his father's picture, which he was attentively surveying.

'I think I see the likeness to myself which scared the old girl so, Aggie,' he said, as she came to his side.

'You should not have left the drawing-room,' said Agnes; 'you alarmed me.'

'Ah! you are not used to me yet,' was her brother's remark; 'I am a curious fellow, and this is my father's house into which I step for the first time in my life. And,' he added, with a deepening shadow on his face, 'that is the father who neglected me and you.'

'Pray, come away.'

'I thought his picture might be in this room,' he said, placing the candlestick on the table, 'although there is an apartment in the house which used to be called Paul's study. I wonder, Aggie, what the father studied, save himself.'

'Hush, hush, Sam!' cried his sister, 'I have

thought like this at times, but I have thought still more of the mystery to which his lips were sealed. Only a little while ago, Sam, you said it was very easy to think the worst of anyone.'

'Right,' he answered, 'let us go back.'

As they moved towards the drawing-room, his sister said,

'Who told you of our father's study?'

'I must have guessed it,' he answered, with his easy laugh again.

'No; that is not true.'

'Well, I have met some of the servants in the village this evening, and asked a few questions of them, if you must know.'

'They will take you for a spy.'

'Not they—what is there to play the spy for in Ilvercombe? I learn a little news concerning my father—is it not natural I should wish to hear about him, and his life here? And yet all that the dolts can tell me is that the mother was very fond of him, and went mad about him, and is still fretting for him.'

'I could have told you that.'

'You could have told me of an upstairs room,

on which the key has been turned since his death, too--but would you have done so?'

'Yes, if I had thought you curious concerning it.'

'In that room may be hidden the secret of our lives—that secret which you lost your liberty in foolishly trying to discover for yourself,' said Sam, eagerly.

'At Chester—not here.'

'The man who lived at Chester—whom our mother told you of—is dead. The papers are not there.'

'Ha! you know that. By what means.'

'I have been working for one end since I have been in England—taking up a clue first discovered in America,' he said. 'I will tell you all some day, when you trust me as much as I trust you.'

'I did not have a doubt of you, Sam, till you spoke like this.'

'Don't doubt me, girl,' he said, laying his hand upon her shoulder gently. 'We are the children of a mother who was wronged, and we are fighting for our rights still.'

'I have the patience to wait—to endure.'

'I have lost all patience, Aggie.'

'Let us get back to the drawing-room,' she said.

He took up the candlestick again, and led the way from the dining-room, his hand still resting on the shoulder of his sister. There was true affection for her in his action, in his looks, in the very ring of his voice, but his heart was dead to the rest of the world, in Agnes Challis's estimation. When he spoke of his mother, of her wrongs, and of the past wherein both had existed, there came a strange, set expression to his face, on which the light died out completely. No—she did not understand him yet.

As they passed into the drawing-room, shutting the door of the dining-room behind them, an apparition, as it were, glided from a screen in the distant shadows of the room they had quitted, and stole with noiseless steps towards the door which brother and sister had closed. There, in the darkness on that side of the heavy wainscot, it took up its position, and listened very eagerly.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ROUSED TO ACTION.

Brother and sister did not return to their seats together by the fireside. Sam Challis stood on the hearthrug, and Agnes at a little distance from him, watched him anxiously. Within the last few minutes there had crept to the sister's heart grave anxiety, despite the protest he had made—not so much a doubt of him, as of the motive which had brought him to Ilvercombe, and the manner in which he might act at a future time. His face was hard and stern when the shadow of the past was on it—Agnes had observed that already, and marvelled at what it might portend. She was a little disappointed,

also, that it was not for her sake alone he had come to Ilvercombe. The words which had escaped him had implied that fact too strongly, without his own acknowledgment of other tasks he had set himself—a confession which had quickly scared old Mrs. Dangerfield from the room. Still to survey him closely, was scarcely to believe him a messenger of vengeance; there was a frank, fearless outlook on his face that was not terrible to confront, and, when he turned to Aggie, his features softened, and were full of an affection he made no effort to conceal.

'I think I will be going now,' he said to his sister; 'you are looking fatigued—I have tired you.'

'A long walk to-day has tired me, not you, Sam,' she answered.

'We shall have time for much conversation to-morrow,' he said; 'and the night is slipping away confoundedly.'

'I should be glad to hear why you did not meet Mr. Redclove on the landing-stage at Liverpool,' said Agnes, anxiously, 'he has always thought you deceived him.'

'That I ran away with his money?' answered Sam. 'It was a natural idea enough, under the circumstances. Did you think so?'

'In my heart, Sam, I believed the story would be explained some day, but as time went on, and you sent no news, I felt the doubts grow stronger.'

'I was never a thief, Aggie,' he said, mournfully, 'but I knew you must think me one until I could return with the money earned, to prove my honesty more clearly. The story without that would have been only laughed at.'

'Not by me.'

'By the others, Mr. Fayre, Daniel Overdown, and the man who bought me out of England.'

'Oh! Sam.'

'Oh, I have never been able to believe in a spasmodic act of charity to the extent of two hundred pounds pitched at a vagabond in the streets of Liverpool,' said Sam; 'but still he sought not to bind me to conditions, as he might have done. He trusted me with money before I was on shipboard, too—being an amateur in deception or in acts of benevolence—

and, like most amateurs, he made a mess of it.'

'You do not speak gratefully of one who was simply sent to help us, and who is above deceit of any kind,' cried Aggie, indignantly.

'Do you know much of him?' asked Sam, curiously.

'I know he acted for the best,' said Aggie, 'or what he thought was the best in our service.'

'His name is Redclove, I hear,' replied Sam; 'was not the woman who supplanted mother a Redclove too?'

'Yes.'

'And yet a sharp woman like you sees no hidden motive in this charity!'

'I see a desire to help us in those who might have helped us earlier with better grace, perhaps; but I feel certain that when Hamilton Redclove came to Liverpool he had only one idea—that of benefiting us.'

'I will try to believe it,' Sam said, more heartily; 'moreover, this Mr. Redclove shall find me not lacking in thanks when I pay him back his money.'

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'Let me say again how glad I am you are able to restore it. I wish you had only come back for that—and for me,' she added.

'You will not say so presently, when God's truth comes to us—when—' he began, with some excitement, before he checked himself, and added. in a calmer tone, 'but we are a couple of parrots, Aggie, and talk too much.'

'We have not seen each other for so long a time, Sam.'

'And we used to trust each other.'

'Yes.'

'Even when I ran wild it was you who took my part,' he continued. 'Now I have sobered down, and become a respectable member of society, the confidence is failing you most strangely.'

'Why do you tell me this again?'

'Because as suddenly and strangely I may want your whole confidence in me,' he said, earnestly, 'because I must have it.'

He walked to the window as if these were his last words; he turned and looked towards his sister thoughtfully regarding him, he came back

and flung himself in the chair old Mrs. Dangerfield had quitted.

'Sit down, Aggie,' he said, impatiently, 'I have not told you how I was saved to this work—and perhaps it may teach you to understand me better, and to trust me more. For you *do* doubt me!' he cried once more, almost resentfully.

Agnes Challis sat down and confronted him.

'I only doubt the wisdom of your next step, Sam,' she answered.

'And I was never very wise,' he said, lightly again; 'but a few words now—and then good-night. How the snow drifts!' he said, glancing towards the curtained window, which had been opened to admit him at an earlier hour.

Agnes waited for his communication very patiently. He did not seem in a hurry to commence, late as was the night; he sat looking at the fire as at a problem that perplexed him. His first words told what was in his thoughts still.

'No, I cannot imagine Aggie Challis, the

mother's favourite, the girl who took her mother's troubles so much to heart as to make them all her own, siding with the enemy against me. But,' he added, with a stamp of his foot on the rug, 'I will not think of that. I am going to tell you why I did not keep my word at Liverpool.'

'Well?'

'A fit stopped me.'

'Poor Sam!' cried Aggie.

'I went back to the fiddler's den. Cuppleditch was dead, and he had been good to me living, now and then. Once I should have starved without him. I wished to give him a decent sort of funeral, and leave something for his daughter, who was a cripple. But she served me badly—she robbed me. It is a long story, which I will tell you at a more fitting time, not now. Whether it was the drink of the night before, or the terrible excitement at the loss of the money, or the coming on of a fever I had caught of old Cuppleditch, God knows; but I went down like a stone. When I came round I was lying in the bed by the side

of the dead man, whom they had shoved close to the wall to make room for me; it was past the hour at which I had to meet Mr. Redclove, the place was empty and everybody gone. They had all hooked it, and I was off my nut from that time till days and days afterwards, when everyone was thinking what a vagabond I was.'

As he went back to the old times, to that old dreadful past from which, as by a miracle, he had emerged, so he went back to the slang of the streets, as more appropriate to the scene he sketched thus rapidly.

'Well, the parish buried old Cuppledith, after all, and took care of me,' he said. 'His daughter did not follow him to the funeral, which was a trifle unfilial; but then there was a man in the case, and Nance had come into money! And men and money together make women happy and forgetful!'

He gave vent to his short laugh again, and Agnes said,

'How did you succeed in life after this disappointment?'

'The parish folk got me a berth on board ship when I was better—they weren't so bad, that lot!—and I went away, never telling a soul about my loss, because I felt there was never a soul who could possibly believe me. I kept it all to myself, and I don't think brooding on it did me any harm; for when I was out west, and found myself in harness, and saving money, just a little, the thought came to me to pay the money back, at any cost, at any sacrifice, to prove I was not the ungrateful devil the world thought me. Well, it has been hard work, but I have saved the money in five years and a half.'

'Thank Heaven!'

'There, that's the story. Is it a very bad one, Ag?'

'No.'

'We shall be rid of one obligation when the money is paid, but I think—at least, I will try not to think,' he said, correcting himself, 'that the Redcloves will be sorry when the money is paid.'

'Does the payment of the money cancel the obligation, Sam?'

'If—but, there, you fight on their side, not mine. I am a stranger to you yet.'

He sprang to his feet, put his hands on her shoulders, and kissed her.

'Good-night. Let me out into the snow; I can find my way home better this way.'

'And to-morrow?'

'To-morrow we shall meet again.'

'Do you know—have you heard—that Daniel Overdown is at Grayling? That he will be here to-morrow too?' asked Aggie.

'Here!—for what purpose?'

'To ask me to become his wife.'

'You have kept this most stirring news to the last, Aggie,' he said, walking the whole length of the room, and turning once again as if to reconsider the statement. 'Daniel Overdown, you say?—the man who tried to reform me and failed, whom I could not bear when I was young, he was so very good, and I so bad! And yet, he *was* good; there was no sham about him; and his was the first helping hand in the days of our collapse. Do you love him?'

It was the same question which old Mrs.

Dangerfield had recently put to her, and she half shrank from it again.

'I—I don't know that I love him in the way a man should be loved who asks to be my husband,' said Aggie, hesitatingly.

'Do you love anyone better?' was the shrewd inquiry now.

'No,' said Aggie, after a moment's pause.

'You will marry Dan Overdown then, to a certainty.'

'I cannot say,' answered Aggie Challis, looking down.

'Ah! but I can,' he answered, confidently; 'I think he deserves you, Aggie, for his faith. And if some day you should be rich—very rich—why, an honest man deserves prosperity also, and I will not begrudge it him, for one. Good-night.'

'Good-night, Sam.'

The brother took up his hat, opened the window, and passed out into the snow, and the sister smiled at him a farewell before she fastened the lock, secured the shutters, and drew the heavy curtains close again. She was the

last up in the house, she thought, and she extinguished the wax lights—which had burned very low that night—and found her way into the broad hall beyond by a second door, not communicating with the dining-room.

There were oil-lamps in the hall and corridors, and these she turned low as she passed to her room, like a careful housekeeper as she was. The business of that long day was at an end, and she was very weary. What a day of incident it had been, and how the world had stirred itself of late to keep her brain throbbing and her pulse at fever-heat. Three figures had marched to the foreground of her life that day —the three who were to influence it most—and each, in his turn, had dismayed and depressed her by all that he had said, though each had spoken of his faith in her. It was a day of many doubts, wherein she had been doubted, too, and where friends seemed vanishing away rather than advancing.

She would be very glad to rest.

Would it have been as well for her if she had been as restless that night as Frances Danger-

field, who sat within her room, waiting for the stillness of the house to assure her it was safe to act? It was she who, from her window, and at an earlier hour, had seen the figure of a man stealing towards the drawing-room, who had heard him admitted into the house, and who, believing it to be Hamilton Redclove—Aggie's lover—had stolen downstairs, when Estelle was asleep, to confound the assignation. It was she who had been amazed by Sam Challis's return—not Hamilton's—and whose religious principles were not strong enough, after all, to turn her from an act of eaves-dropping now that a new danger seemed advancing to her rapidly.

Yes, a new and awful danger—she was sure of it. She had tried to live it down, to set it aside, but it was beyond her strength, and the trouble was close upon her. This was no longer the incoherencies of an old woman who might be going mad again, but the hints, the convictions of a resolute man to confirm all that she feared, and had tried hard not to fear. Still she would not, could not, believe the worst until the proof was evident, and that proof was hid-

den in the sealed study of the late Paul Erasmus Wilberforce Dangerfield, or it was not existent. She would like to know the truth of it—the whole truth. She would be glad to be prepared at any cost now, even the bitter cost of her own self-esteem. It was a temptation, and she gave way to it. To resist would have been saint-like, and, alas, she was only a poor, weak, sinful mortal, after all!

There was not an hour to be lost; and when the night was an hour later by the timepiece on her mantel-shelf, and Estelle was sleeping soundly, the figure in the list slippers and dark dress once more stole from her room, stood in the shadowy corridor without, listening for an instant, and then passed noiselessly to the next door, which was ajar, and which she pushed open softly.

'The keys,' she whispered to herself, as she crept in—a woman roused to action at last, and a woman at bay!

CHAPTER XXXV.

CRUEL TRUTH.

The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield had not adopted this unceremonious method of procedure without a sharp struggle with the conscience which she possessed. She was a woman whom a suspicious nature had made miserable all her life, and was now to render guilty, though in that hour she would have been loth to acknowledge it. Important papers of her husband, she reasoned—papers not committed to the care of the mother by any special trust—were hidden from her by one who had no legal claim to them, and they were hers by right of widowhood. Surely, if these documents were

likely to affect her interest, or throw a light upon a past that had been always incomprehensible, or were necessary to prepare herself against the future, to resist or to succumb to it, no one had a greater right to them than she. She could not leave it all now till her husband's mother died; she should be in London, and these Challises would have her at their mercy, if she were not on guard. The man who had come upon the scene like a fate there was no resisting, the stern fate, in which the old woman lying there believed, was no weak mortal to cope with. He talked of his rights; he came as an avenger of what he termed his mother's wrongs; there would be no justice at his hands, and much trouble would ensue. Even Agnes Challis had suffered imprisonment in her eagerness to obtain possession of papers of which her mother was aware; only she, Frances Dangerfield, the woman with the greatest claim to them, had been kept in the dark. She only wanted justice for herself, she thought; it was not in her heart to steal or destroy the documents, but to be prepared for the nature of

their contents, and so on an equal footing with those who might think it worth their while to deceive her. There was no one at Ilvercombe whom she could trust, she felt assured.

She had reasoned out this theory long before the moment when she was standing in the room with her watchful eyes directed to the sleeping figure in the bed. In the time of action she was as alert and cunning as if such base business had been the study of her life. There were no scruples of conscience, no hesitation now; she was as firm as Macbeth's wife, and as determinate of purpose. She stood in the shadow of the heavy draperies hanging from the cornice of a huge, old-fashioned bedstead, and listened to the fitful breathing of the sleeper, who was beset by restless dreams that night. She was cautious to a degree, and no statue could have shown less signs of animation, until the mutterings of the one distressed by sleep had ceased. Then Frances Dangerfield glided like a ghost across the room towards the toilette-table, and to a basket thereon, which she carefully inspected. Another pause, and the woman on watch

turned towards the dress which the mistress of the house had worn that evening; crouching away from the rays of the night-lamp, whilst she searched the pockets. The clink of the keys—old Mrs. Dangerfield's private keys—sounded for a moment in the stillness with an ominous rattle of steel, suggesting treachery, and the woman in the bed tossed to and fro, as though half warned of felony.

'Therese,' she called, with startling distinctness; but the maid was sleeping heavily in the adjoining chamber, and did not hear her. Old Mrs. Dangerfield was accustomed to ramble in her slumbers, and Therese was not likely to wake and listen to the maunderings of her mistress.

'Paul!' was Mrs. Dangerfield's next cry; 'Paul, why don't you come and help me!'

For an instant Frances wavered, as detection seemed imminent; her hold upon the keys relaxed, as this sudden appeal for help from the helpless dead was wailed forth in the night.

When the mutterings of the sleeper ceased

again, however, the intruder was making softly for the door, with the keys held tightly in her hand. Another instant and Frances Dangerfield was passing along the corridor with swift, silent feet; the time for hesitation was over for ever, the goal was in reach, and the truth was close upon her. She had studied the house at Ilvercombe of late days, and every turn of it was as familiar to her as to the servants. Her late husband's study was far away on the same floor, a room that overlooked the park land, and must have been a pleasant place for musing in the old summer days gone by, when Paul Dangerfield sat at his open window, with romance before him, and passion growing on him, and the misery of all its complications not apparent in his day-dreams.

Since his death, the study had been closed and locked, and had been only opened twice; once to be vigorously searched by those who took in hand the arrangement of old Mrs. Dangerfield's estate, and once when papers from Chester had been brought here and locked in the iron safe, along with her new will.

Frances Dangerfield stood before the door of the study, with the keys in her calm hands. She had steeled herself to the ordeal, and was not to be dismayed by any nervous feelings of apprehension at the eleventh hour. There was a great task to be done, and she was on the eve of its accomplishment. The long steel key on the bunch was the key of the study door, she fancied, and she was right. The wards of the lock turned with it at once—harshly and gratingly like a lock in disuse—and the door opened on the dust and darkness of the room itself.

'At last!' she muttered.

There was an oil-lamp on a bracket half-way down the corridor, and the woman abroad that night went back for it, and returned with it in her hand. She entered the study of the dead husband, closed the door upon herself, and locked it carefully. Now she was safe from intrusion, and at the worst—in the very face of detection, if it came there—she would defy them all, and assert her rights. She was in her husband's room, with her husband's books and

papers; and who was living to challenge her privilege to be there? She had a right here long since, but had not availed herself of it after her husband's death, and her mother-in-law's affliction: she had asked no questions then, and had been too proud, or too apathetic, to be inquisitive. In his lifetime, when Paul had seemed to be content with life, and she had trusted him, he had spoken of his room at Ilvercombe, and of the books which he might bring to town when time would give him the chance, and they were on a visit to his mother; but time had passed on to eternity with one of them, the visit had been never paid, and the study was almost as it used to be in his day.

There was a close air in the room, a smell of mouldy furniture, old books, and musty papers, natural to a place thrown out of gear, and under lock and key; the blind before the window had remained undrawn for years, and was coated thickly with dust: there had been no living hands upon the volumes in their open cases, or on the oaken table, where magazines

and pamphlets of forgotten years lay heaped together; cobwebs of strange length and thickness hung pendant from the ceiling, one having been spun in a fantastic pattern from a bust of Shakespeare on the mantel-piece, to an old bronze table-lamp upon a library desk adjacent. The mildew of neglect lay like a pall on everything.

In a corner of the room was the iron safe, to which the mother had alluded, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield had not stopped to gaze around her, but gone at once to the object of her search. There was no sentiment from the widow in this chamber of dust and ashes—it appealed not to her feelings in any way. Paul Dangerfield was not a husband who had died in the honour of love and glory of fidelity; she had kept his secret without treasuring his memory; she had respected his name, but not the owner of it; in her heart this strong woman had never forgiven him his trespass against her. Why should she? What was he to her, after the discovery of his treachery, but a blight upon her life here?—the evil he had done lived

after him, and she was still on guard to fight it.

She placed the lamp on the top of the safe, and looked carefully over the keys, fixing on the right one by the name of the maker stamped on the steel ring of the handle. The key turned, and, with an effort, Frances Dangerfield swung open the heavy iron door, and took down the lamp again to throw a light upon the search. The safe was nearly empty—there was a nest of iron drawers at the bottom, and above them lay the papers for which she had come in search —a heap of old letters, tied round with green ribbon, together with sundry memoranda in her husband's handwriting, secured together by red tape. Below them, and in a big envelope, unsealed, was the will of the present mistress of Ilvercombe, but she was honest in her transgressions, and did not care to open it. It was not her business, until old Mrs. Dangerfield died; she would not have looked at it then, had the temptation been a hundred-fold what it was. But these papers were her own, and had been secreted from her;—here was the history of the

troubles and temptations of Paul Dangerfield—the clue to the mystery which he had ever kept from her, and she had vainly guessed at—the letters of the rival who had supplanted her, and brought about the misery of her life.

She set the lamp upon the chair away from her, and took the first letter to her hand. She stared at the date upon the envelope, the post-mark of a time before she was married to Paul Dangerfield, and then opened it with untrembling and unflinching fingers.

'So long ago as this, then, it began,' she murmured, as she bent over the paper, the first line of which was the stab for which she had thought herself prepared, but which went deep down into her heart.

'*My dear husband!*'

The fair head—for Frances Dangerfield was still fair—bent at once in horror and despair over the letter which she held. The cruel truth, after all, was too strong for the woman whose pride had outlived her affection.

'It can't be true!' she whispered rebelliously again; 'he would never have been so great a villain as this!'

She flung the letter to the floor, as though it had stung her like a serpent, and seized the papers which were with the letters, and the string of which she broke in her impatience. Her calmness had deserted her at last, and the papers were wildly scattered about the carpet, until she groped upon the floor in the dust that lay thick there, greedily collecting and counting them. One long strip of printed paper, with writing interlined, attracted her notice—the one conclusive, damning piece of evidence which had wrecked the mother's mind before the wife was struck down in her turn. She tore it open eagerly. It was the marriage certificate of Paul Erasmus Wilberforce Dangerfield, gentleman, with Agnes Challis, spinster—and it bore a date of three years before her own unhappy match.

'Great God!—they were married, then!' she exclaimed. She let the papers fall once more, covered her face with the hands which had released them, and rocked herself slowly to and fro in her new misery. Yes, a new misery, and with it a new temptation and new life. She

wondered how it would end, and what would become of them all, even in the midst of the soul's agony with which her woman's strength was vainly battling in that terrible hour of her defeat.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

WAITING FOR HIM.

THE late morning dawned at Ilvercombe as if nothing had happened to distress the inmates of that establishment, and life began to stir there shortly afterwards. The servants were down early, and old Mrs. Dangerfield, waking early also, was found in her arm-chair in the breakfast-room by Agnes Challis, who was the first visitor to make her appearance.

'I did not expect you would be down so soon as this, grandmamma,' said Agnes, as she stooped and kissed her.

'I could not rest. I have not slept all night,' she answered, with that cool disregard for the

real facts of the case in which people moderately wakeful invariably indulge.

'Indeed! You are not looking the worse for it,' said Aggie.

'I daresay I shall feel the worse for it presently. Did your brother stay long after I had bidden him good-night?'

'Not a great while.'

'It will take time to grow used to him. I wanted to speak of him before Frances and Estelle came down this morning. Shall I trouble you too much?'

'No.'

'I don't quite trust him yet,' said the old lady; 'I have given him up for good so long—but I don't wholly distrust him, Agnes. I can't, with that look upon his face, which seems to ask you for your confidence. If he should turn out an honest man, I leave it to you to do your best for him. I can't leave that trust in better and more able hands,' she said, kindly; 'and there will be enough money for you both.'

'Pray, don't speak of this again.'

'Of what?'

'Of the future, which, you say, will leave me rich. I don't look for wealth—under some circumstances, I would prefer to be poor.'

'Strange young woman, who would prefer to be friendless!' observed the old lady; 'but, there, I have done with that subject. Now I have something else to ask you. Have you made up your mind about accepting Daniel Overdown?'

'No,' answered Aggie.

'Not yet? Why, perhaps you will not have him, after all!'

'I don't know. I want to tell him—I wish him to be aware—oh! don't talk to me, please, now,' cried Aggie, turning pale, and wringing her hands together piteously.

'You want time to consider this again—or do you want advice from one who has known the world longer than you have, child?'

'I only want time,' was the reply; 'I shall decide correctly when that time comes.'

'You are looking very miserable over it. Go to your own room, and breakfast there. You will not care to face these two Dangerfield women this morning.'

'I am not afraid of them,' said Aggie, faintly smiling, 'and I do not suppose their ill-feeling will be long-lived, when they know the truth.'

'May I tell it to them?'

'No; let them discover it for themselves,' was the reply.

Old Mrs. Dangerfield nodded her head, as if in acquiescence, and Aggie Challis retired to her room at the hint conveyed by her grandmother. There was a little sitting-room upstairs, and contiguous to her bed-room, that had been placed at the disposal of Agnes during her stay at Ilvercombe, and here she breakfasted quietly, and endeavoured to shape out her resolutions, which still wavered strangely and unaccountably. She would be glad when it was all over, she thought; when, one way or another, she knew how it would end, and what lay before her. She was almost certain now that she did not love Daniel Overdown; she was sure there was no fervour of affection to set her heart beating at his name, and make of him, in every thought and dream, a lover to be idolized. That might be the love of poets,

in their rhymes, but not of common men and women, who had their bread to earn, and the grim realities of life to encounter.

And yet how he loved her; how patiently he had waited for her; how deeply he had studied her; how generously he had let her go away to a higher sphere than his own, rather than bind her by a word to him! He had had great confidence in himself, and in her affection for him—she had always loved Dan Overdown, in her own way—and she was aware long ago, perhaps, that Dan loved her with all the strength of his honest nature. Could she break his heart by refusing him now—by telling him that his world was not hers, and there was no retracing her steps? Could she tell him that she was likely to be rich some day, and that she could not share her riches with one who would have shared his last crust with her? Would he not think it was the money which had risen in his way to her; that her 'expectations' had hardened her against him, and set her thinking of another lover, who would forget her prison-life and antecedents,

not for her own sake, as he would do, but for the dowry she would bring with her to the altar?

'What would he think of me?' she murmured, with her gaze directed to the avenue of leafless trees, and the snow-covered road beneath, along which he would be advancing presently for the one answer to his life. Oh! for a few more hours to think of this—for him to think of this—and the time not so close upon her!

She was gazing from the window still, with far-away thoughts that would distract her—thoughts of Hamilton Redclove, and of all that he had said and looked, and dreamy wonderments as to what he might have meant in his last outburst of excitement, when he had discovered her in tears—when two warm arms stole round her, and a rain of kisses fell upon her face.

'Estelle!' she cried, when she had recovered her surprise.

'Ah! you will never forgive me,' Estelle cried. 'I have let you see what an ungenerous, jealous, wicked girl I am—I am not

worthy any woman's trust—but think the best of me that you can. Try to think the best of me!'

More sighs and tears, and passionate embracements before Agnes Challis was allowed to answer for herself.

'I have not a great deal to forgive, Estelle,' she said.

'You have—you have!' reiterated the half-sister.

'You have suspected me a little; but you are naturally suspicious, and I *was* walking in the fields yesterday with your cousin.'

'I have been very wrong—I have thought so meanly of you—I had built up such a story of deceit and falsehood that I blush to think of it. Oh, Aggie,' she cried, 'pray forgive me! I will never—never—have an unjust thought of you again—I will love you, next to *him*, for all the rest of my life.'

'There, there, Estelle—forgiven very freely all that there is to forgive,' said Agnes. 'Now, tell me what has brought back the affection which I thought was gone for ever?'

'I did not know you had a lover, Aggie,' replied Estelle.

'Ah!—who told you this?'

'Mamma—my dear mamma—who takes your part this morning, and tells me how wrongly I have judged you.'

'You and she together, Estelle.'

'Yes; both of us.'

'Your grandmamma has betrayed my confidence, despite my wish to the contrary,' said Aggie, with a sigh; 'there is no trusting any of you. A promise goes for nothing—a secret is not worth treasuring, even though its disclosure may bring bitter pain. I did not want you to know this, Estelle.'

'But I knew it already,' replied she; 'did you not tell me something of this before?'

'That I had a lover—hardly. But what I did tell you, in confidence, you let Hamilton Redclove know at once.'

'No, no; I don't think it was that exactly,' said Estelle, in some confusion; 'I—I only said——'

'It does not signify,' said Agnes, interrupting

her; 'my life is very strongly marked, and I am above disguising it. If your grandmamma had waited a few hours, though.'

'She has not spoken to me or mamma,' said Estelle, interrupting in her turn; 'we have not exchanged a word concerning you this morning.'

'They must have met last night again,' said Agnes Challis, musingly; 'your grandmamma must have come straight to your room.'

'No; mamma went to hers—that is, I remember waking suddenly from sleep and missing her, and waiting till she came back to me. Oh, what a fright she gave me, Aggie!'

'Indeed!'

'She came in as white as a ghost, dear,' said Estelle; 'she had been frightened herself—grandmamma had called out in her sleep, and she had gone in to make sure that she was well.'

'And then they sat together talking about me,' said Agnes—'a curious subject, that had better have been postponed.'

'Then you would not have had me to trouble you this morning, you mean,' said Estelle, pouting a little.

'Scarcely that, Estelle. I am glad I have come nearer your stormy little heart again,' said Aggie, smiling sadly; 'but don't you know—you who are so well posted up in my affairs—that I am waiting here in solemn state, to receive the lover you have spoken of?'

'Yes, I know that,' Estelle confessed; 'I heard Mr. Overdown was coming here this morning.'

'They have not let much of the news escape, Estelle?'

The younger girl laughed gaily; the clouds had vanished, and she was happy and loving again, and there was hope before her. There was always hope with Hamilton close at hand, and no other woman in the way.

'Well, what does it matter, Aggie?' she cried. 'Should I not have seen him here half-an-hour hence, and been introduced to him, and heard all from your own lips?'

'I don't know,' said Agnes, thoughtfully.

Estelle dropped at Agnes's feet, crossed her hands on her lap, and looked up into the soft, fair face bent over her.

'Tell me all about him, please; I am dying to hear.'

'I have nothing to relate, Estelle. I have no more secrets to confess,' was the reply.

'No; but what is he like—is he fair or dark? where did you meet him? how is it you have never mentioned his name? what made you love him? how did it begin? and when? and who began it? What made you think he——'

'The torrent of questions was disturbed in its flow by Aggie's little hand being placed over the busy mouth of Estelle.

'I cannot answer any of those questions, baby,' cried Agnes; 'they would take a week to reply to, and lead to others more embarrassing.'

'Is he very handsome?' she murmured, from beneath the hand still lightly pressed upon her mouth; 'you will tell me that, won't you?'

'I will not tell you anything. I have not owned I love anybody yet,' said Aggie. 'Estelle,

you will leave me now, please. I don't think I can bear any more at present, even from you.'

'Why, how grave you have become!'

'These are grave times,' was the enigmatic answer.'

'If I have said anything to pain you, dear, I am very, very sorry,' cried Estelle.

Agnes shook her head, as Estelle rose to her feet and stood regarding her with a little consternation. Agnes only yearned to be alone—she would be at peace with herself for a few minutes before Daniel Overdown came upon the scene. The half-sister took the hint conveyed, and moved towards the door, coming back again, with an impetuous rush, to put her arms about her neck and kiss her many times.

'There shall never be an angry thought between us again, and you shall be always my best friend, if you will love me,' she murmured.

'Oh! make no rash promises, Estelle.'

'You have not quite forgiven me, I see?'

'Yes, I have,' answered Aggie. 'Good-bye, child; say good-bye now for a little while, as I wish you. I insist.'

Agnes had seen Daniel Overdown advancing along the avenue, with a companion by his side —her brother Sam. Estelle turned quickly, following her gaze, and taking no heed of her commands.

'He is coming—let me see him!' cried Estelle, 'just for one moment before I go away.'

Agnes Challis sat back and did not say another word. Her heart was throbbing painfully, and the trouble of a whole life seemed to come suddenly upon her with a force that took all strength and power of will away. What should she do? what could she do?

Meanwhile Estelle, standing a little aside, watched the two men approaching, with great interest and grave surprise. Her big grey eyes widened at their nearer approach, and she turned suddenly to Aggie.

'Which one,' she cried, 'which one can it be?'

Agnes Challis did not answer—did not seem to hear her.

'The younger one, the taller, is not bad-looking. Is it he?'

'That is my brother,' answered Agnes, very pale now.

'Your brother!'

'Yes.'

'Oh! Agnes, surely it is not—it cannot be the other one,' said Estelle, getting over the shock of this unlooked-for revelation in her curiosity concerning Daniel Overdown. 'Why, he is——'

Agnes Challis stopped her quickly.

'He is the best friend I ever had in my life—the truest, most faithful and most earnest,' she said, very firmly.

Estelle stooped and kissed her for the very last time that morning.

'I have only to say, dear, that I hope every happiness may be yours,' she murmured. 'Good-bye again, God bless you; good-bye.'

She darted from the room, and Aggie Challis clasped her hands together and waited for her lover's coming.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

DAN'S COURTSHIP.

Daniel Overdown was not long in finding his way into the presence of Agnes Challis. He and Sam had come along the avenue at a sharp pace, and there had been no time wasted *en route.*

When the servant admitted him and announced his name, Agnes rose and shook hands with him, painfully conscious of the long, steady stare with which he favoured her.

'What a change since yesterday!' were his first words, after wishing her good-morning; then he added—'I mean in the weather.'

'Yes, a great change. You did not come across the fields to-day, Dan?'

'I should have lost my way, and not have got here at all,' he replied.

They sat down at a little distance from each other—each embarrassed; Daniel Overdown the more nervous of the two. It was courting in cold blood, to begin with; it was a formally arranged piece of business, which took all the romance and poetry out of it, if any had ever existed. The daylight was so strong and clear upon them both, and he looked so unlike a lover, sitting there.

'You have seen my brother?' Aggie Challis asked. 'It was he who was with you in the avenue just now.'

'Yes. He called on me this morning,' replied Dan, 'and we have walked from Grayling to Ilvercombe together. He has changed very much for the better; he is a straightforward, clear-headed, sensible young chap, Aggie, who will get on in the world.'

'I hope he will.'

'I like Sam,' affirmed Dan Overdown; 'he is a man without any nonsense in him, and not likely to stand much nonsense in anybody else.

Not a first-rate good temper, certainly; not too truthful, probably; but then what a terrible training he had before a gleam of good-luck fell to his share.'

'Where is he?'

'He turned back towards the village,' answered Dan; 'he said he would not disturb you at present, and it was not very likely I was going to press him to come on.'

Daniel Overdown laughed, and then, meeting with no responsive smile on the face of his companion, he became preternaturally grave.

'Has he told you of the manner in which he lost the money Mr. Redclove gave him at Liverpool?' inquired Agnes.

'Yes. He has been telling me also—but there, I haven't come to talk about your brother. You know that.'

This was sharply, almost irritably said. He had an object in view, and he did not care to go round about it in a helpless and purposeless fashion, though he felt less bold that morning than he had bargained for. He had had much to trouble him last night; there had been a host

of ugly thoughts to resist, and the life beyond had seemed suddenly full of uncertainty. He was not himself—he might never be his old self again—but he would prefer knowing the worst or the best to dreaming on as he had done during the last twelve hours.

'Is that any reason you should be cross with me?' inquired Agnes, sadly.

'No, God forbid,' he said, hastily. 'Don't mind me, Aggie. I was awfully bothered last night; I haven't slept a wink for thinking of you, and of all I was going to say to-day. Now let us get this over for once and all, girl.'

He drew his chair, with a sudden jerk, more closely to hers, and faced her with an earnestness that made her heart sink again, despite her struggle with it.

'I shan't surprise you very much, Aggie, by saying I want you to become my wife,' he began. 'I daresay, despite myself, you have often guessed I had that idea in my mind when you and I were in Prosser Street with the old people. I kept it back as well as I could, in fair-play to you, who had a right to look round

for yourself, and were going away to new friends. But, Aggie, that love was my existence—the best part of it, and I shall be a wreck without it.'

'Oh! Dan, don't tell me so!'

'It's only the truth; don't let it frighten you,' he said. 'It may be my fault for being a fool, for not knowing myself better and you better, and letting a fancy grow into a great big passion, which holds me in a vice and chokes me. I can't think of anything else save you; you come between me and everything I set my hand to—you are the end of my life!'

He had grown excited in his pleading, and his dark eyes were ablaze with fire now. Agnes had not expected this warmth of expression from him, had even anticipated that business-like, confident air which had invariably characterised his demeanour, and had been ever impressive when accompanied by that earnestness which was seldom lacking in him. But this force of passion was new in Daniel Overdown, and she shrank from it in her astonishment and sorrow. Yes, sorrow! Nothing that

he had said had given her one moment's joy, one blissful leap of her heart towards his own, the silent rapt acknowledgment of his power over hers. She was grateful to him for the past, she could believe in the truth of every word he uttered; but she was afraid of him, and could not answer yet.

He seemed to wait a moment for her own reply, and, failing to obtain it, he went on again.

'I know I am not fit for you, Aggie,' he continued; 'that's a plain truth which has been forced upon me very strongly lately by my own will and by other people. I know how much too good you are for me.'

'No, no, Dan,' urged Aggie; 'that is not true.'

'I know how you have grown to be a lady,' he continued, 'and I have remained the same rough fellow whom you knew at first, but whose roughness did not scare you as it may do now. I see all this so plainly, that I wonder at my impudence—my *cheek!*—in walking into this grand house and asking you to go back to Prosser Street and become a gunsmith's wife. I

seem to have got in your way, an ugly black obstruction to a life that would be happier without me, unless you love me—oh, unless you love me, Aggie! I thought you did yesterday,' he continued; 'I can't believe it quite to-day, until you tell me for yourself all that's in your heart. But, if you say there's love there, God Almighty only guesses what a happy day this is for me.'

His voice trembled with the passion that was in him, and the tears welled to the eyes of his listener.

'What can I say?' she murmured.

'The truth,' he answered, 'and never mind me for one instant. You have yourself to consider, first of all, and I would not have you come to me an unwilling woman, even for the happiness I have been raving about. You have rich friends here who may make you rich, and set you apart from me completely. I am only a foreman in a factory, and can never be much else. Still, there is no one in all the world to love you as I love you; and I am waiting for my answer.'

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AGGIE'S ANSWER.

It was not easy for Aggie Challis to reply—it was, for a while, even beyond her power. Daniel Overdown had explained the state of his feelings very clearly and forcibly, and was waiting for her answer, but words were lacking yet on the part of his listener with which to assure him or confound him. If she were less sorry for him than she was, if there had been more love than pity in her heart towards him, if the future did not seem so dull and desolate, the effort to say 'Yes' would not have been a difficult task. Here was one man's happiness to be secured by a word—and that man had set

himself the task of saving her, had consoled her mother's hours by the promise to look after her when she came out of prison, and who, fighting hard to live himself, had never swerved from his task—and yet the word rose not readily to her lips.

She had turned very white, and Daniel Overdown, watchful as a lynx, had observed this with a sense of growing despair, although he sat before her now outwardly unmoved. He was the prisoner of his passion awaiting the sentence of his judge. Agnes felt compelled to say something—the silence had become painful and unnatural.

'I should have liked more time, Dan, to—to answer you,' she murmured, feebly.

'I don't think it is necessary,' was his reply; 'you must know what you think about me pretty well by this time.'

'No, I don't,' she confessed, in a weak voice.

'That hardly seems possible,' said Daniel Overdown, shaking his head gravely.

'You don't appear to think this is a surprise to me,' reasoned Aggie, 'and that it was only

yesterday you hinted at the truth for the first time. What my feelings are towards you, Dan, in all respects save in the new position you have taken up, I know, of course; but they are not the feelings which you claim. I know how much I esteem you for a friend—how good and unselfish you are—how invariably kind you have always been, but I do not know my own heart. There!'

'You love another man,' he answered, moodily.

'I deny it,' she cried, at once; 'there is no other man who has ever spoken a word of love to me but you.'

'That Mr. Redclove is a wiser man than I thought him,' muttered Dan.

'What do you mean? what has he said?' said Aggie, quickly roused at the mention of his name.

'I had a long talk with him at the "Lion" last night—did I not say so?'

'No.'

'I am a bit confused. I have forgotten everything in the dash at you, which has frightened you so much,' he said, mournfully.

'I am not frightened, Dan,' replied Aggie; 'but now tell me, if you please, why you consider Mr. Redclove a wise man?'

'He is a man of the world, who seems to understand women, and sums them up more cleverly than I do—because he has more to do with them, I daresay.'

'Did he speak of me last night?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Of you and me together?'

'Yes. He was interested in us both, or pretended to be, and he got rather warm in his argument.'

'Tell me what he said,' Agnes asked, impatiently.

'Well,' said Dan, with reluctance, 'he said you would be choosing misery and slavery—those were his words—in choosing me, and he had told you so already and offended you. He said I was not fit for you—that you would be able to do much better for yourself, being a lady now, and I being a journeyman gunsmith still. Well, God knows I haven't shirked the comparison—I was saying the same

thing myself only a minute or two ago to you, but not as he said it—not with his contempt for a man so low down in the scale as I am—not with his bitter sneers at the class I belong to.'

'He was cruel,' cried Aggie, indignantly, 'he had no right to talk of me, and to insult you as he has done.'

'I don't know,' said Dan, irresolutely; 'I led up to the subject, being full of it, and considering him a friend, and we talked of you for a long time. It was his candid opinion—and he out with it, not caring how I should take it, or thinking I was strong enough to bear it, but he had said before that, mind you, much that was comforting and cheering to me.'

'What was that?' said Aggie, still intensely curious.

'I told him I had come to Grayling to propose to you.'

'How foolish that was!' exclaimed Aggie.

'Thankee,' said Dan; 'that's plain, at any rate.'

'Yes, Dan, but it was a little foolish to let everybody know this.'

'He seemed one of us—I liked the man for the past, as I like Mr. Fayre—and he drew me out a bit.'

'And his words of comfort—what were they?' inquired Aggie, reverting to the subject on which her curiosity had not been gratified.

'Well,' said Dan, hesitating and stammering, 'I hardly like to repeat them. He said you thought I was the best man in the world. He thought I had an excellent chance of winning you—that I might be sure of you, in fact—and he said to-day we should be swearing eternal fidelity.'

'He dared to talk like that!' cried Aggie, fairly roused—fairly losing that temper, over which, at times, she exercised considerable control.

'Yes, and I thought it was particularly kind of him.'

'It was particularly rude,' she cried. 'What right had he, almost a stranger, to speak of

the state of my feelings towards you—to affect to know them so well as to detail them to you in the room of a public-house—to patronise you, to give you encouragement to come here to—to say all that you have said?' cried Aggie, winding up her outburst somewhat incompetently.

'Yes,' said Dan, in a disconsolate tone, 'I see he had better have let that little game alone. I see—why, Aggie, you are crying!'

'No, I am not,' she replied, hastily dashing away some angry tears from her eyes; 'I am only hurt at being the common topic of this place. Oh, what a wicked, disagreeable man he is, Dan.'

'Very likely,' said Dan, in assent.

'I should hate him if I saw more of him,' she cried; 'I should despise his airs of superiority, and tell him why I think so little of him.'

'I wish you would think a little less of what he has said, just at present, and a little more of all that I have told you, Aggie,' Daniel Overdown remarked, in mild reproof;

'you break away from the one answer which you have to make, and which——' he was silent for a minute before he added, very mournfully, 'it is not very hard for me to guess at.'

'Yes, it is,' cried Aggie, impulsively.

'Ay—what—why is it?'

'If you guess I am going to echo that man's words to you, and say I am above you in the world; that the past is nothing to me, and I have myself to think of now, not you—if you guess that, you are wrong.'

'My darling Aggie, you love me, then!' he cried, starting to his feet.

Aggie turned very white again, and waved him back into his chair by the rapid gesture of her hands.

'Hear what I have to say, Dan, whilst I have the courage to say it,' she cried; 'it is for your sake as well as mine. I have no one else in all the world to care for as I have you, and I will try my best to love you. Your life depends on me, you say; then my duty is to make that life content, if you will only give me time.'

It was the old plea couched in another form, and he echoed back the word.

'Time!' he said again.

'Time to consider the position—to know my duty better, if you will, Dan; to get used to the knowledge that we are engaged to one another—from this day, if you will—before you ask me in too great a hurry to call you husband.'

'My dear girl,' he cried, holding both his hands towards her, 'take any time. I have hurried you, I see that now; but you have made me very happy at last.'

'It is well I should have the power to make some one happy,' she murmured, still very faint and white.

'Then we are engaged to be married—a regular engaged couple, eh?' Dan said, his hands still extended towards her.

'Yes, if you wish it,' she replied, placing her hands in his.

He rose from his seat and kissed her, as he had always imagined from books and poems it was the fit and proper thing to do in cases of a similar kind—and we believe it is allowable—

and she took his eager caress in sign of their betrothal, but with the colour still strangely dead in her cheek and lips.

'God bless you, Aggie!' he burst forth, in the fulness of his heart again; 'I did not think five minutes ago it was to end like this—upon my soul I didn't, you looked so awfully straight and solemn.'

He might have kissed her again in his excitement, if she had not drawn her hands from his, and pressed them to her face, as she sat down in the chair from which she had arisen.

'I am troubling you,' he said, solicitously. 'This has been too much for you; you have been brooding and worrying about it. Don't you think I had better go away for an hour or two?'

'I should be better by myself, Dan,' was her answer.

'I'll be off, then,' he said. 'I'll go into the village and find Sam, and tell him all the good luck that has come to me this morning.'

'It may be very bad luck, Dan,' she answered, smiling faintly.

'No, no, that can't be. Under no possible circumstances can that be the case, lass,' he said, with a chuckle of exultation at the result of his wooing.

He was a considerate man in his way; he felt it was the kindest act and the best policy to withdraw; there was even an instinctive fear, if he remained much longer, that she would say something to render the force of her promise less conclusive and satisfactory. By herself she would settle down to the position that they were engaged, and feel all the happier presently for the knowledge of the fact. He rose and shook hands with her again; he let one hand fall upon her shoulder; gently and caressingly he looked into her face, until he met a second smile, less faint and forced than the other had been, and one which he could almost take heart from. Then he stooped, kissed her forehead, and went out of the room.

That was the result of Daniel Overdown's wooing, and it was happiness and peace of mind to him. She had accepted him, and she was too good a girl to say 'Yes,' if in her heart she

had meant 'No.' That was not like Aggie Challis, a woman of great courage, who had never shrunk from the truth. She loved him, only he had scared away every evidence of her affection just then by his rough manner of proposal. She was ready to give up her new friends and her grand style for him; she was coming back to his life, and to the home wherein she should never know a moment's sorrow, if all his power and strength could keep her from it. It was like a dream to think that she belonged to him.

It was like a dream to Aggie Challis too, only she did not thrill with joy like the gunsmith. Like a dream of wild speculations and impossibilities, with dream-figures, very spectres in their vagueness, flitting across her path, and bewildering her completely; but not a happy dream that brought fair thoughts to her, by shadowing forth the future as it might be.

Engaged to Daniel Overdown! It *was* her duty; it had been her answer, made in some little haste and anger at the last, as if in defiance of the Fate in which her grandmother believed;

she had rendered one man happy, and should be content herself in good time. She hoped to make Dan rich presently, and to prove that, when her prospects brightened, she had been anxious he should share the brightness too. In wealth as in poverty, always true to this man, acknowledging his virtues, looking away from his faults, and blind—always inevitably blind—to the consciousness of the unfitness of the match. They could tell her presently she was too grand for him, as Hamilton had dared to tell him last night—that it was a terrible inconsistency, a social suicide, to pass from her present life to a Birmingham back-street, and know no greater ambition than to share his petty struggles for existence; and she would answer, bravely, 'What should I have been without him? His life was the life that saved me.'

She was dreaming on, when Estelle came, on tip-toe, into the room, as if Agnes were dreaming in earnest, and a footfall might wake her too suddenly. She crept in with a wondering face, her eyes protruding in a way that was almost

burlesque in their eagerness of expression.

'Is it all over?' she asked, in a low whisper, as if there were a hundred eavesdroppers in the corridor without.

'Yes, it is all over, Estelle.'

'And you have——'

Estelle paused for Agnes to complete the sentence. She was considerate at this moment, and, from the thoughtful countenance of the fair girl by the window, it was impossible to read what had been Aggie's answer to the love suit.

'Accepted him,' said Aggie in reply; and she looked fearlessly into the eyes of her half-sister, and spoke without a quaver in her voice.

This was the beginning of her ordeal, as this might be the first comer to tell her how badly she had chosen for herself.

Estelle continued to stare at her, as at a riddle beyond any solution which her own weak mind could offer, and then with the consciousness that it was not safe to interfere, or to hazard a remark—reading that very clearly in the steady, hazel eyes surveying her—she put

her arms round her, and kissed her with much warmth.

'It's all for the best, I daresay, as you love each other very much. My dearest Aggie, I congratulate you.'

'Thank you,' was the quiet answer.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MORE CONGRATULATIONS.

ALTHOUGH the fact of the engagement of Miss Challis was all over the establishment of Ilvercombe before luncheon, and every servant of the household, and even the three gardeners, 'snowed out,' and drinking their hardest at the village inn, were thoroughly up in the details, Agnes was spared for awhile those comments upon the match from which she had been shrinking in imagination already. There was a tacit ignoring of the case, for which she was grateful; there was a general kindness of demeanour towards her, for which she was more grateful still. Estelle hardly left her for an

instant; old Mrs. Dangerfield, looking a little mystified certainly, and a degree or two more thoughtful, was gentle of accent and soft of speech, and young Mrs. Dangerfield took more than extra pains to make amends for her discourtesy of the preceding night. Frances had suspected her then. With her suspicions removed, she was anxious to be kind and conciliatory, and behind all this was the great, awful truth which had come to her in her husband's study, and struck her down last night as with a flash of fire from Heaven. It had struck down much moral rectitude as well, and the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield knew at last that she was a hypocrite, and must, for her own and her child's sake—for her pride's sake—remain a hypocrite and liar to the end of her life. She knew the whole story now, and it debased her. There could be no revelation of it—she would prefer to die rather than allow that secret to pass into the world for the world's verdict upon it. No one must guess at the truth after Paul's mother was dead, and she must not, by a word or look, betray that any

thought of it had come to her. And yet there were two or three already with a strong suspicion that it had not been fair play with the woman who had died in want—Mr. Fayre, Dan Overdown, Agnes Challis, and her brother had hinted at strange things which might come into the light to scare her, and, surely, her father, Lord Redclove, by some means, and at some time after her marriage, had discovered the story, and had hidden it as jealously as it was now her task to do. She was a woman who, with all her faults, was unused to deceit, and whose conscience had not yet grown accustomed to the position of affairs, and these were the early days of utter misery for all her outward inflexibility. She had considered herself so good, and strong, and devout till this day—so far above the petty temptations and vanities of life—so close to that strange God of hers, to whom she had prayed for that peace which had suddenly been set for ever from her.

She would do all that she could, except tell people she had never been the wife of Paul

Dangerfield—that on Estelle fell the brand of illegitimacy, and that the young woman from whom she had shrunk was the daughter born in wedlock, and whose rights had been stolen from her and her brother. She was only an usurper. The property of Paul Dangerfield belonged to these children, not to her, and though Paul Dangerfield had married her, believing that his first wife was dead, still the error was his, and the shame of it remained to her—the only legacy to which she was entitled.

She was very kind to Agnes Challis that day—for the first time in her life, there was more than common interest evinced—and the engagement to Daniel Overdown was fresh matter for her conscience, for the strengthening of her new interest in her. There was no great opportunity of showing that there was a change in her demeanour, but it was, nevertheless, demonstrated, without obtrusiveness, and Aggie took it as the *amende honorable* for unjustly suspecting the relations between her and Hamilton Redclove, who, by the way, was keeping unaccountably from Ilvercombe and his cousins.

There was a luncheon-party at Ilvercombe that morning, and it was beyond Aggie's power to interfere with old Mrs. Dangerfield's arrangements for it. Mr. Fayre and his daughter had heard last night of Mr. Overdown's reason for coming to Ilvercombe, and they had driven over to hear, or to judge for themselves, of the result, being as curious concerning it as other folk, and, possibly, as much perplexed, and the hero of the hour—the veritable Daniel—had been sent for by Mrs. Dangerfield, and asked to luncheon, along with Samuel Challis from America.

'I wish you had not done this,' murmured Aggie to her grandmamma; 'you might have spared me.'

'Daniel Overdown and your brother are very welcome here,' replied the old lady.

'Yes; but Daniel is not used to this life.'

'He has sent word back that he will be most happy to join us.'

'Ah! I don't doubt that,' said Aggie, ruefully.

It was an odd party at luncheon, as well as

ill-assorted, and Aggie Challis was nervous about it and its incongruities. The invitation had been given in good faith, and accepted in a similar fashion, and there was no wish to hold Daniel Overdown up to ridicule before people of an extra degree of refinement. Dan was out of place, but he was not uncomfortable. The great house, the guests, and the servants did not dismay him—he seemed even to rise to the occasion, to the gratification of her by whose side he was sitting triumphantly. A keen observer naturally, he was not likely to make any grave mistake, when he was on guard against himself—and though he had not studied, or had the opportunity to study, table etiquette in any form, he did not bite his bread, or half swallow his knife, and shock these worthy folk in consequence. They could not help watching him, and studying him a little, and he was aware of it, without betraying a sign of discomfiture. He felt he had the credit of Agnes's taste to keep up, and he saw that she was more embarrassed than himself. Mr. Fayre, regarding him stolidly from the opposite side of the table,

was not slow to set off Daniel Overdown to the best advantage by starting topics on which he knew the gunsmith could grow eloquent, if he liked—the state of affairs at Woodley Moor, the grievances of the colliers, even, despite the presence of the ladies, the politics of the day. America, too, came-in for a fair share of discussion, and Dan Overdown proved himself as well up in matters across the Atlantic as Sam Challis, who had recently arrived from New York. It was Sam who was more ill at ease than Daniel Overdown, who was grave and taciturn, and from whom a remark was wrenched with difficulty. He felt like a spy in the camp of the enemy, rather than a friend of the assembled guests, he told his sister, after luncheon was over, and when Dan had run the gauntlet of "society" without losing caste.

'You are no spy,' she murmured back.

'I don't know what I am yet,' he answered, shrugging his shoulders; 'but I take my place here with an ill-grace, Aggie.'

Well, it is not very unnatural.'

'You have grown used to the position; I don't think I ever shall,' he said. 'Did you notice how that woman watched me—shivered at me?'

'What woman?'

'The young Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'No.'

'And her daughter, with that half-vacant glare at you and me, as if puzzled by us both. By heaven,' he cried, 'it's awfully strange—awfully depressing. It shakes a man's resolutions from him.'

'You must not resolve too quickly, Sam, or without me,' said his sister; 'I wish this for many reasons.'

'Where is Mr. Redclove? I expected to meet him to-day.'

'We all expected him, but he has preferred to keep away.'

'I should be very glad to see him.'

Daniel Overdown came to the side of his betrothed, and conversation became more general, until it was time for these atoms of humanity to separate. Mr. Fayre and his daughter

were going back to Grayling; Daniel Overdown had another meeting to address at Woodley Moor, and Sam Challis had offered to accompany him and address the meeting too.

'I am used to that kind of thing now,' said Sam; 'I like to consider myself one of the people, speaking up for the people.'

'Ah!' said Dan, cautiously, 'I'll hear your arguments as you go along, before I trust you with your voice amongst my men.'

He turned to Aggie.

'I hope I haven't been quite a clown here?' he asked, in a low tone.

'Not at all, Dan.'

'It has been a hard pull through, though,' he added. 'Did I make a mistake?'

'Not one.'

'Was it all right about that lump of bread with the fish?'

'Hush, hush! Quite right.'

'And I haven't bored you to-day?' he asked, kindly.

'No, Dan.'

'Or assumed too much on the strength of my

position, of which I am awfully proud, and can't help showing it?' he said.

'No,' replied Aggie once more.

'That's all square. And now I won't trouble you any more to-day, because I can't very well,' he added, with a laugh, 'as there's a torchlight demonstration to-night, and late hours are not fashionable here, the old lady has told me. And to-morrow!'

'What of to-morrow, Dan?' she said, as he regarded her very earnestly.

'To-morrow morning I have to say good-bye, for even sweethearting must not keep a man from his work, or the work of the world would stand still, I reckon.'

He took his departure along with Sam Challis, and Bella Fayre came to Aggie's side at once, as if she had been watching her opportunity.

'Tell me all about it, Aggie,' she said, half petulantly. 'I seem to be in the dark of late days. You are stopping here too long, and forgetting me.'

'I shall soon be back at the vicarage again.'

'That selfish old lady will not let you come,'

said Bella, almost spitefully; 'she—but never mind her just now, dear. Is it all settled? Are you really engaged to that—to Mr. Overdown?'

'Yes, I am engaged to him.'

'He is a very odd, nice, positive kind of person,' said Bella, reflectively; 'but I should not have thought—— Oh! bother, here's papa.'

It was papa's turn, and Agnes Challis was not sorry. He came towards the two girls, with his strongly-lined face full of interest, and sat down, facing them both, offering his hand to our heroine.

'I know what you two are talking about,' he said. 'Will you accept my congratulations also, Agnes?'

'I thank you, Mr. Fayre.'

'Congratulations that are all the more sincere,' he added, 'because I, for one, know you have accepted an honest man, and have let your heart speak out in his favour.'

'At a sacrifice, though,' remarked Bella, 'for I cannot help saying——'

'My dear child,' said the vicar, in mild remonstrance, 'you will allow me to be the better

judge of this matter. You will allow me to remind you that I have known Mr. Overdown many years, and have had proof of his high character and unselfishness. A little hasty at times, a little harsh in his judgment of those who are opposed to him in trade-affairs, in politics, but a man in a thousand, take him altogether.'

Bella thought it was only one man in a hundred thousand who would wear white trousers at that time of year, but she did not give voice to the idea that had seized her. She was not pleased, and she was in her heart considerably astonished at Aggie's choice; but then the history of the past was a sealed story to her. She studied the position from her one point of view, and was perplexed by it. There was a mystery in it, she was certain, and she had made up her mind to discover it, flattering herself that she already held the clue. She was the only member of that little community who doubted Aggie Challis's love for Daniel Overdown, good as he was, and long as Aggie had known him.

She went away dissatisfied with the aspect of affairs, and would have argued the point all the

drive back to Grayling, if her father had not exercised his parental authority, and finally forbidden the subject.

'I am sure there is a mistake somewhere,' she said, even then, 'and,' she added to herself, 'I am going to find it out.'

Meanwhile the cross-fire of congratulations had not ceased. It came from all quarters, and rendered the recipient ill-at-ease. She was not used to the position yet, and time had not been of service to her. They might have spared her a little while longer, she considered.

It was Frances Dangerfield who came to her side later in the evening, when Estelle was with her grandmother, and who laid her hand on Aggie's, and looked earnestly into her face.

'You will not care a great deal for my best wishes for the future,' she said, sadly, 'for you have not learned to like me, and I have been hard and unjust towards you, but I offer them to you in all sincerity, Agnes.'

'Thank you, madam,' answered our heroine.

'And I want you—if you are able—when we are away from each other, to believe the best

of me that you can, and to dwell no more upon my irritability, which has wounded you, and my jealousy—there, I own it!—lest Estelle should think too much of you, and so forget me, by degrees.'

'As if that were likely!'

'And,' she added, with increasing excitement, 'I wish you to make me a promise.'

'Without hearing what it is?'

'Oh! I can't expect that. But I wish you to appeal to me—only to me—if you are at any time beset by doubt, or difficulty, or danger—if trouble is near you or your brother—if money is wanted——'

'Money—and from you!' cried Aggie.

'I would be glad to help you—I would be so very glad,' she murmured, and Agnes saw with amazement that tears were swimming in the eyes of the speaker. It was a great change—a great softening of the widow's heart towards her—and Aggie replied,

'You are very good to regard me so kindly as this, but I do not fancy I shall ever want friends.'

'The world is full of uncertainty. I hope you will remember. I—I hope you will come and see Estelle in London.'

'Mrs. Dangerfield!' exclaimed Aggie.

'It is my wish, as well as my daughter's; you are half-sisters. God has brought you together. I would have you love each other now, for I can trust you with the secret of your life,' she said, speaking very hurriedly.

'Yes, you may trust me,' whispered back Agnes Challis.

Was this part of the dream with which she had been beset all day—the strange day-dream, wherein she had accepted Daniel Overdown, and Frances Dangerfield had grown wondrously womanly, and yet marvellously strange? The world was altering with Aggie Challis rapidly, or she was dreaming still. She would be glad to rest that night, to sleep upon it, to feel less feverish and faint.

But the night was not yet over, and there was one more ordeal to encounter. When Frances Dangerfield and her daughter had bidden them good-night, and retired, and the

old lady by the fire seemed rousing herself to her usual state of extra interest, a late visitor was announced.

'There is never any rest in this house,' muttered old Mrs. Dangerfield, as the outer bell rang loudly; 'people come here at all hours of the night, without any thought for me.'

The servant entered to announce Mr. Hamilton Redclove before this querulous assertion was completed.

CHAPTER XL.

THE LAST CONGRATULATIONS.

PERMISSION having been accorded to Mr. Hamilton Redclove to pay his compliments to the ladies, that young gentleman was shortly afterwards shown into the drawing-room. He looked round quickly as he entered, as though he had expected to find a large company present; and then, with grave formality, shook hands with old Mrs. Dangerfield and Agnes.

'I am afraid I am late,' he said, apologetically; 'but I have been to London to-day on business, and could not reach here at an earlier hour.'

'To London and back?' remarked the old

lady. 'Your business must have been of great importance to necessitate such haste.'

Hamilton regarded the speaker attentively, as if something in her words, or the tones in which they had been conveyed, had struck him as peculiar.

'Not of very great importance,' he said. 'I knew Lord Redclove would be in town to-day, and I thought I would call upon him, and make sure he was in the enjoyment of his usual health and spirits.'

'Had you any doubt of that?'

'Marriage might not have agreed with him; the arrival of a son and heir might, at his time of life, have unduly excited him. I was anxious concerning him.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' answered old Mrs. Dangerfield, stoutly.

Hamilton laughed at this flat contradiction, as he sat down near the ladies, his hat still in his hand, significant of his intention of only intruding upon them for a few minutes. He was in excellent spirits, but he was not looking well, Agnes Challis thought. There was a tired

expression about him, as though his long journey had been almost too much for him, and there were dark shadows underneath his eyes, strongly significant of a state of unrest.

'I was anxious about myself—will that do, Mrs. Dangerfield?' he said.

'Why anxious?' she rejoined.

'You forget my position has become precarious,' he replied. 'Lord Redclove no longer requires the services of a private secretary; and the *ci-devant* private secretary has lived up to his income, and not put by anything for that rainy day which comes to every improvident idiot in turn. Hence, becoming acquainted with the fact of his lordship's being in town for a few days, it was surely praiseworthy on my part to seek him out, and ask what he could do for me?'

'Ah!—yes—well?' said the old lady, either strangely indifferent to Mr. Redclove's position in life, or disinclined still to put faith in his statement.

'Well, Lord Redclove can do nothing for me, at present,' Hamilton continued, coolly. 'If he

hears of anything, at any time within the next ten years—should he live as long—he will drop me a line. Meanwhile, I must shift for myself, look up other friends, attempt other vocations; do anything save bother him for the loan of a few pounds.'

'How much money did you want to borrow?' asked old Mrs. Dangerfield.

Hamilton flinched at the inquiry, and the colour mounted very quickly to his face.

'I do not want any money at present, thank you, Mrs. Dangerfield,' he replied.

'Why, you said just now——'

'I told you what Lord Redclove had hinted at,' he said, interrupting her, 'but I did not ask my uncle for money, or go to town with that intention. I shall be very hard-up indeed, I shall have swept a crossing opposite his club, before I appeal to him for pecuniary help.'

'You have quarrelled with Lord Redclove,' said the old lady.

'We have exchanged a few fiery words, that's all.'

'Did you go to town to quarrel?'

'Being in a quarrelsome mood, perhaps I did,' was the reply.

'Did you quarrel about his secret marriage?'

'Not I,' he answered, laughing pleasantly now; 'his marriage was his own affair. I had no right to comment upon it, although I have a bad habit, at times, of making remarks on matters that should not concern me.'

He looked at Aggie for the first time since he had sat down, and she was sure that her colour changed beneath his gaze, despite her effort to appear unconcerned by his remarks.

He changed the subject, as if anxious to spare her any embarrassment.

'My cousins—have they retired for the night?' he inquired.

An answer in the affirmative was given him.

'It is of no consequence,' he said; 'I am only the bearer of a few lines to Frances from her estimable papa.'

He took a sealed letter from his breast pocket, and tossed it carelessly on the table.

'I almost wonder he trusted me with it,' Hamilton remarked.

'What should he fear?' asked the old lady.

'My tearing it up by the way.'

'Why should you wish to destroy the letter?'

'The pure malice of the monkey,' he replied, shrugging his shoulders. 'Lord Redclove is a little put-out—possibly I put him out a little,' he added, drily, 'by the news of his daughter and grand-daughter and Miss Challis, all being together here as your guests. He cannot understand it; he is disturbed and excited, and sends down his instructions in consequence to his daughter Frances.'

'I wonder he has not condescended to instruct me,' muttered the old lady.

'I beg pardon—so he has,' said Hamilton, coolly producing a second epistle, sealed with the arms of the Redcloves, and handing it to Mrs. Dangerfield. 'I believe, my dear madam, that is for you.'

'Why did you not give me this at first?'

'I took the liberty of preparing you for so unlooked-for an event as a communication from his lordship,' he said.

'I require no preparation,' was the reply.

She took the letter from Hamilton's hands, settled her gold-mounted glasses on her nose, leaned back in her chair, and broke the seal. Hamilton watched her very keenly, after glancing once more at Aggie Challis, but the effect of Lord Redclove's communication on the reader was not apparent. The lined face betrayed no emotion or surprise, the thin hand shook not, the figure in the chair remained calm and passive throughout.

'He condescends to give me advice,' she said, folding the letter again, 'and thinks I have acted with grave indiscretion in allowing you, Agnes, to remain in this establishment along with his daughter and Estelle. He does not trust you, child.'

'That does not matter to me, I think,' Aggie murmured.

'Are your feelings hurt?' was the grandmother's next inquiry.

'Not at all,' was the confident answer.

'Excuse me, for a moment,' said the old lady, rising, 'I will take Frances's letter to her, and

she will compare it with my own—if she has any faith in me, that is.'

She took the second letter from the table, and went at once from the room, Hamilton opening the door and closing it behind her. Agnes Challis felt a sense of embarrassment oppressing her when her grandmother had withdrawn. She was alone with him—alone with the man of many questions, who said harsh things, and had not spared her woman's pride of late days. When they had been together last he had wounded her to bitter tears, which in their turn had wounded and discomfited him; if he would only be silent now till old Mrs. Dangerfield's return she would be very grateful. The day had been a long one, and full of novel excitement; if he had heard the news of the engagement, he would be acting a generous part to forego all comment upon it till a time more fitting.

Probably something in her looks betrayed this mute appeal for mercy, for he came back to his seat and was silent for a short while. He sat with his hands folded on his knees, the picture

of patience, for the space of a minute and three-quarters, when, his patience giving way, he burst into words.

'Miss Challis, I am unhappy until you grant me your forgiveness for my rudeness of yesterday,' he said, hurriedly. 'I acted unkindly and unwarrantably, and I hope you will think no more of what I said.'

'I forgive you Mr. Redclove,' she murmured; 'pray say no more about it!'

'Only a few more words,' he entreated, 'just to add that it was my interest in you that led to my harshness. I thought I was acting for the best, and did not understand how thoroughly I had been playing the part of ill-adviser, and in what a brutal fashion, until I discovered you in tears. Then I could have shot myself for an idiot, with great complacency.'

'The subject is over, I hope,' said Agnes, with forced calmness.

'And I am forgiven—freely?' he cried, extending his hand.

Agnes affected not to see it, but she answered,

'Yes.'

'You'll not shake hands with me?' he said, persistently; 'you do not forgive me in real earnest? You do not believe in my regrets for having offended you?'

'I do not comprehend you, Mr. Redclove, if you insist upon my being explicit,' Aggie said at last. 'You speak of your sorrow for having pained me by your words—which you repeated, however, in a sterner fashion to one whom you knew I greatly respected.'

'Daniel Overdown?' he said, inquiringly.

'Yes.'

'I was mad with sorrow before he came upon me, and he added to my madness—that is all I can say in excuse. Every word that I can say,' he repeated, mournfully, 'unless——'

He looked eagerly towards her, but she was watching him curiously, as if afraid of him. He was a man she could not trust again.

'Do not say any more, Mr. Redclove,' she said, quickly. 'I do forgive you, on the promise of your silence. There!'

She held her hand towards him, and his

fingers closed upon it with a strange, eager force, before it was withdrawn, somewhat hastily, again.

'I shall leave here none the worse,' he said, 'for thinking you do not regard me as your enemy.'

'Never as an enemy, Mr. Redclove; and with the past——'

'Oh, let us leave the past alone!' he said, fretfully; 'you and I have dropped from it and its delusions, and there is the future only to consider. For a time, even in that past, I was your friend. What a change since then!'

'You have always been my friend,' she replied, in a low tone.

'Until yesterday.'

'I will think of yesterday no more.'

'A kind promise, but difficult of fulfilment. Always your friend, you say?' he muttered.

'Yes.'

'A friend in whom you could confide, even now?'

'Yes,' she answered, after a moment's hesitation.

'Tell me then,' he said, very humbly, 'what has happened to-day whilst I have been in London? I would prefer hearing it from you instead of them. Mr. Overdown has been here?'

'Yes.'

'You are engaged to him now?'

'Yes.'

'My God!' he exclaimed, in so low and stifled a tone that she did not affect to hear him, and yet the exclamation unnerved her, though there was no longer the ring of contempt or surprise in his voice. There rose to her recollection his last explanation, that sorrow had driven him mad. Sorrow! What sorrow could he have to affect him in this fashion? to set him before her as white as a ghost, or trembling like a child who had been scared to death's door by one?

He was firm and self-possessed before he thought the change in him had been observed.

'Mr. Overdown seems a straightforward, earnest, manly fellow,' he said, 'and you have known him many years, Miss Challis. Let me

wish you every happiness this life can bring before I go away to-night.'

'Thank you, Mr. Redclove.'

'A man's wishes don't count for much, or there should not be another trouble for you in this world, where you have been so unfairly treated,' he said, with a faint smile.

'Thank you,' she remarked again, lacking a better reply at the moment.

'And now I need not worry you any more,' he said; 'I daresay your friends have almost killed you with their kind congratulations to-day.'

He seemed to relapse into deep thought, and almost to forget her presence there; for when she spoke to him once more he started at the sound of her voice.

'You have not heard that my brother Sam has returned to England?' she said.

'When did he return?' Hamilton asked, apathetically.

'Last night he came to see me for the first time.'

'Indeed,' he replied, half-absently.

'He will tell you why he did not meet you at the Liverpool landing-stage,' said Aggie; 'he has come to England to pay back the two hundred pounds you kindly lent him.'

'Indeed,' he said again, but in a more absent fashion still.

This startling piece of news had no power to rouse him into interest, and she was so doubtful if he had heard it that she repeated it.

He seemed to wake to the consciousness of being dull and inattentive after this.

'Come,' he said, with forced gaiety, 'that's an amount that will help me on in the world, if I use it with discretion.'

'Then it *was* you who lent the money to Sam, and not Lord Redclove!' cried Aggie, triumphantly. 'I am glad of this, I was sure of it!'

'Don't be quite sure of anything on this earth,' he said. 'I received my uncle's instructions to help you both, but when Sam disappeared with the money, I was too proud to own to Lord Redclove that I had trusted your brother too readily. Hence my pride—always standing in

the way of my advantage—Miss Challis, you see, cost me exactly two hundred pounds.'

'Which Sam will return you to-morrow.'

'Sam is very good.'

The door re-opened, and old Mrs. Dangerfield came slowly back into her place.

'Your cousin Frances begs you will excuse her to-night,' she said.

'Certainly.'

'She will be at Mr. Fayre's vicarage to-morrow at eleven o'clock, with Estelle, if the hour is convenient to yourself.'

'Convenient—in what way?'

'To escort her and her daughter to London. Is it not Lord Redclove's wish!'

'I don't know,' murmured Hamilton.

'She did not show me the letter,' muttered old Mrs. Dangerfield, 'but she implied it was.'

'Then it was, I have no doubt,' said Hamilton, 'although I should have considered it more like my uncle's policy if he had begged Frances to remain and keep an eye on this dangerous young person here.'

This was lightly said, but it failed in its effect. No one smiled.

'Possibly he *has* done that, after all,' said the old lady, 'and Frances, an obstinate woman, mind you, determines to leave at once.'

'That is likely,' answered Hamilton, thoughtfully; 'Frances is a woman who will not play the spy, even to oblige her own father. She fights on our side, I am sure.'

'Our side!' said Aggie, wonderingly, 'that means——'

'Your side,' he replied, as he rose to his feet. 'Good-night.'

He shook hands with them both—with Aggie Challis last; who, looking at him, saw that he had turned very white again.

'This may be the last time I shall call, I forgot to say,' he said, 'the last time I shall see you both, unless you come over to Grayling with my cousins to-morrow. But the weather is too uninviting for a seven miles' drive; I cannot expect so great a compliment paid me.'

'Mr. Overdown is coming to-morrow morning,' began Agnes, by way of an excuse.

'Ah! Present my compliments to him; I had forgotten him for a minute,' said Hamilton, interrupting. 'Good-bye, Miss Challis.'

'I hope it is not good-bye,' she said, quickly and frankly.

'Thank you, for saying so,' he replied. 'Still I have been an element of discord in your life, and the sooner I withdraw the better. I am one black shadow the less on your path.'

'I do not believe it,' answered Aggie.

'Ah! but I do. I am so much wiser and cleverer, you know,' he said, with his old sharpness of tone predominant, 'and I see so very clearly that——'

He paused, and stamped his foot angrily upon the carpet.

'You shrink from me, and it serves me right,' he cried; 'when I would pass from you with fair regrets, I am balked by all the bitterness of discontent that is in me!'

'You judge yourself too harshly,' said Aggie; 'I have heard nothing to offend.'

'There, there; don't excuse me to myself, Miss Challis. And if I never see you again——' he

paused, and looked so hard and mournfully at her that her lips quivered strangely in spite of him, 'think the best of me that you can. Good-bye.'

He raised her hand suddenly to his lips, bowed gravely over it as he kissed it, and then went upon his way.

'This cannot be for ever,' murmured Aggie Challis.

'"For ever is a long day,"' the grandmother quoted.

CHAPTER XLI.

NIGHT TIME.

THIS was one of old Mrs. Dangerfield's restless nights, to which we have heard her allude more than once in the course of this story. The hour was late, and Aggie Challis was anxious to be in her room, to think over the incidents of the day, without interruption, rather than to sleep, for the spirit of unrest was in her also, despite her grave, fair face; but the mistress of the house showed no intention of retiring, and the younger woman was forced to remain, for company's sake.

Old Mrs. Dangerfield was disposed to brood after Hamilton had taken his departure. The letter he had brought had disturbed her, after

all, though she had not cared to betray any signs of distress to the bearer. It rendered her wakeful and depressed.

'This has been a weary, miserable day,' she said, at last, feverishly; 'I don't know that in all my life I have spent a worse.'

'Why, how is that?' asked Aggie Challis, in surprise.

'Everything has tended to unsettle me, at a time when I should be cool and collected,' she said; 'your engagement to Overdown, the coming back of your brother, and now this last visit of young Redclove with his uncle's letter to me. To think that he who has held aloof from me for so long should dare to dictate to me my course of action—to warn me that you are dangerous and untrustworthy, to advise me to place confidence in Frances, and think and act only for her and her daughter. What next—what next, I wonder?' she repeated, in a higher key.

'May I see the letter, grandmamma?' asked Aggie.

The old lady drew it from her pocket, and

dropped it quickly into the fire, where it kindled into a flame and burned away.

'I had forgotten he asked me to burn it,' she muttered; 'I am forgetting everything to-night.'

'Did you destroy it to spare my feelings?' asked Aggie.

'Yes, child; yes.'

'No, madam, no,' Aggie responded, very quickly; 'but to keep from me what I have known for years, and which Lord Redclove hints at again in the letter you have burned.'

'Great heaven! why do you say this to me?' cried old Mrs. Dangerfield—'and to-night?'

'Simply to spare you one untruth, which deceives me not and answers no end,' said Aggie, 'for I am not curious now about the past; let it rest for awhile.'

'Till I am dead, you mean.'

'Living, you shall have peace, if it lies in my power, madam,' said Aggie, very gently; 'that is the task I have set myself.'

'Knowing I deceive you?'

'Knowing you cannot deceive me, but that

you love me as your dead son's daughter,' was the reply.

The old lady held out her arms to her, and Aggie went towards her and was enfolded in them.

'Why did I not know you earlier in life, my Aggie?—why did that poor dead son you speak of keep the truth away from me?' she murmured; 'why has my life, from beginning to end, been one complete mistake?'

'Is it a mistake to love me at the last?' Aggie asked.

'Oh, no! Well said, child,' replied the grandmother; 'even to me there comes a blessing at the eleventh hour, and where I had only looked for hatred and uncharitableness. Now, let me tell you, Aggie, that in the iron safe of my Paul's study—in the room locked up—you will find some letters of your mother, and many papers of your father, and I would have you ask Frances Dangerfield to read them over with you. They will explain the will that is there also. You two women—and you two alone—may see the best way to act, and you must

think of everybody. I can't,' she added, feebly; 'I never had the strength.'

'But—my brother?'

'You will act without him in this matter, to begin with,' said the old lady, decisively; 'I wish it. If it's the last word I had to say in life, I wish that, Aggie.'

'I cannot act against him.'

'It may be acting for him,' was the reply. 'I ask you for your own sake, I command you for the sake of your father and me, to do this. I cannot trust your brother to be merciful.'

'And you trust me?'

'Yes.'

'I will read the papers, then, with Mrs. Dangerfield, not binding myself in any way to act upon them afterwards.'

'This you promise?'

'This I promise, if I live.'

'If you live!' echoed old Mrs. Dangerfield. 'What put that in your head?'

'Life is uncertain, surely?'

'If *you* live!' muttered the grandmother. 'I never thought of your dying before me, and of

what would happen then. There, you unnerve me; there has been too much talk of death to-night to please a woman on the edge of her own grave. Let me take your arm upstairs, and tell Therese to follow us.'

The instructions were given, and Agnes and her grandmother went up the broad stairs together. At the door of the elder woman's room they paused, and old Mrs. Dangerfield said, very solemnly,

'Good-night, child; and God be with you till we meet again.'

'Shall I come and sit with you for a while?'

'No; Therese will do that.'

'You are not going to sit up, I hope?' Agnes inquired.

'I am not going to rest immediately; but then the old don't crave for rest—don't require it like the young. I think,' she added, 'that I have work to do before I sleep.'

'Pray, let me help you.'

'That is beyond your power, Agnes. Good-night again; think no more of what I have said, until the time comes to act. You should have

nothing save bright thoughts, for you are entering on a new life, believing that marriage means love, and constancy, and happiness. Is not that it?'

'It should mean that or nothing,' was the answer.

'And it means all three with Daniel Overdown. Ah! well,' sighed the grandmother, 'I wish it had been Hamilton.'

'Pray, don't say so! You cannot guess what is for the best.'

'No; I have been never able to guess that.'

These were the parting words between the kinswomen, and they gave a turn to the old train of thought when Agnes Challis was safe within her room. They turned her from the one theme which had stalked into the foreground that night—which had been the aim and object of her life before love had gained the mastery.

Love—and for whom? She had not owned to loving Daniel Overdown, not as a woman should love the man whom she accepts for a suitor; and yet she was as troubled as a love-

sick maiden that night, and dreamed in the moonlight like a very Juliet.

But it was scarcely the face of a Juliet thinking of her Romeo, as she sat at the window, with the curtains drawn back from the winter landscape, all white and silver beneath the moonbeams; not a face full of praise, and rhapsody, and hope, with the stamp of heaven upon it, the ever creative heaven of her own bright future—glorious fallacy that it may be to the girl who loves for the first time. It was a face expressive of pain, of an effort at resignation at which her heart rebelled—the face of one who has awakened from a dream, instead of one who dreams on and believes visions reality.

Engaged to be married! Yes; she had promised Daniel Overdown to become his wife; she had taken pity upon him, and saved him from despair; she had rewarded his long study of her, by answering 'Yes.' She could not—dared not think out the story to the end. He had given her time, her own time; and it would not be difficult to train herself to the duty which she had undertaken. He would not hurry her;

he would wait patiently for years, and in years she should forget.

Forget what? She did not whisper all that was in her heart; she did not dare to own that Daniel Overdown was deposed, had never reigned, had only held the foremost place by the right which constituted him her benefactor, never a lover, or the ghost of one.

Suddenly, in the midst of her reverie, a voice of the night startled her by calling out her name, and she sprang up and pressed her face to the glass, so that she might peer down into the shadows of the garden close beneath the windows. There was a man standing and looking up at her, or her dream had taken a new shape. She opened the window with trembling hands.

'Don't be afraid, Aggie, it is I—Sam!' her brother called forth, in a low tone.

'You here again? at this hour! Has anything happened?'

'I am watching the house, that's all; and there are those who don't sleep in it, any better than yourself,' he said, in the same suppressed tone of voice.

'What do you mean?'

'There is a light in the room of our father's study to-night—there was one last night,' Sam replied.

'Impossible!'

'I saw it after I had left you, and tried to climb up by the ivy, which broke down with me. It is there again to-night.'

Aggie Challis was a brave woman, but she felt the blood running not so warmly in her veins as it had done a minute or two since.

'Are you certain of this?'

'Quite certain. I have been expecting the light—watching for it,' he repeated.

'I will go. Wait underneath the windows of the study till you see me, Sam, or hear my voice.'

'All right.'

She closed the window, took up her light, and went with a rapidly-beating heart into the shadowy corridor.

It was a rash adventure and required all her strength of mind to follow to the end. If Sam were right—and it was not likely that he should

be the victim of hallucination—there were plotters abroad, and it was necessary to watch them and confound them. In the disused apartment of her father, her grandmother had owned to valuable papers being secreted, and others in the house, servants, perhaps *visitors*, had heard of this fact, and were searching for them when honest folk were sleeping. She was acting for herself, and in her own cause, by proceeding to the rescue. Nervous and excited as she was, it did not strike her that she might be venturing into no common danger until she stood with her hand on the study-door, which was ajar—startling proof of a trespasser lurking within.

She hesitated then for the first time—the thought of awakening Therese, or one of the servants on the upper floors, occurring to her as a necessary procedure before she faced the unknown on the other side of the wainscot.

She listened. The silence was unbroken by a sound; no one stirred within the study; if anyone were breathing there, she must have heard it, listening thus intently. She could be-

lieve at last that it was a delusion of her brother's, and her hand stole forward softly and pushed the door inwards by an inch or two, whilst her great hazel eyes glared at the opening thus made.

She drew back again quickly; there *was* a light burning in the study, and mortal hands had placed it there, as surely as there must be a mortal form amongst the dust and books of her father's favourite room.

The light was very bright, but the stillness of death was in the room. There was not a movement within, Agnes was certain, and unable to endure longer the suspense—the horror of the position—she pushed the door aside, and went in, with a hand pressed on her upheaved breast.

One quick, eager, comprehensive glance, and then the truth appalled her utterly, and a wild scream of affright escaped her, and rang echoing through the corridors.

The iron safe was open, and old Mrs. Dangerfield lay on the floor before it a dead woman, with the keys clutched tightly in her hands.

BOOK THE FOURTH.

CRUEL TRUTHS.

CHAPTER I.

WHAT THE WILL CONTAINED.

DEATH had come swiftly to the great house at Ilvercombe, and there was much talk in the country of what had happened, and sundry grave speculations made concerning it. Old Mrs. Dangerfield had been a character in her way, if somewhat obscure and shadowy; and the long years of her insanity, followed by her unlooked-for recovery to reason, had rendered her an object of interest to her neighbours. That she had gone mad about her son, everybody knew; that she had idolised him, and for ever mourned for him, was part of the story; and that she should have died in his room seemed

a fitting sequel to it all. To the outer world it was a little incomprehensible, perhaps, unless her state of mind was to be questioned presently, why she should have gone to the study at the last, unlocking the iron safe where Paul Dangerfield had kept his papers, and dying before its open doors. To the inner world of friends and relations, there were separate theories evolved, but there was scanty satisfaction obtained from any of them. To Aggie Challis there was mystery, and yet a clue to it. The papers of which her grandmother had spoken an hour or two before her death were missing from the safe—there were no proofs of the marriage between Paul Dangerfield and his first wife forthcoming—there were no letters of the mother and father, full of the affection that had died out like a flame, to be discovered, The will was there, and nothing but the will; and it was probable, thought Aggie, that old Mrs. Dangerfield, becoming alarmed at her own confession, and fearful of the result of it, had destroyed the documents before her sudden death.

There were the burnt ashes of paper in the empty fire-grate, as evidence of this; and Aggie Challis read no greater mystery and suspected no greater plot. Had the papers been stolen by anyone whose interest it was to obtain possession of them—and who were consequently the enemy, or enemies, of the Challises—would not the will have been abstracted, too, when it was a will so strangely significant of reparation for all past mistakes?

That will was to be seriously considered, to be criticised, analysed, and protested against when the inquest had been held, the verdict of God's visitation recorded, and the funeral performed with some degree of pomp and parade.

It was a grand funeral, and all Ilvercombe was astir. The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield took the arrangements upon her own hands, and spared no cost to do honour to the dead. She had seen the old lady's solicitor, and asked permission to do this; and he had told her that no permission was required, as she would discover for herself in the will, which Frances

would not read, or allow to be read, till the day of the funeral.

She took the lead in everything that appertained to rule in Ilvercombe, and no one interfered with her. She fell naturally into the place of mistress of the house, now that her husband's mother was dead, and the servants took it for granted that she was mistress already, and were not elated by the change.

Agnes Challis recorded no protest, or thought of any. She was amazed at the depth of her own grief, feeling that it was scarcely natural she should mourn so much, though the old and the young had been brought together in their strange latter days, and the love between them had grown strong, as suspicions grew weak.

It did not matter to Aggie that, at the last hour of her life, the poor woman had perhaps lost confidence in her again, or, dreading the scandal which the truth might bring to light, had destroyed, with the papers, the opportunity of establishing a mother's good name. Aggie could understand such weakness, and forgive

it. To the Dangerfields, it would have been a terrible revelation; and she who had died had possibly thought at the last of the memory of the dead, rather than of justice to the living.

It was a grand funeral, we repeat; and the tenantry, who had mustered by fifties round the entrance to the family vault, got very drunk in the evening at the village inn, when folk more sober had assembled in the drawing-room of the mansion, to hear in what manner the rich woman had willed away her money. It would be a strange testament, everybody thought; for Mrs. Dangerfield had been a strange woman, and hosts of distant relatives, of whose existence and kinship no one had scarcely dreamed, scented the plunder, and came in troops to Ilvercombe.

One man arrived at a late hour, and took most of the relatives by surprise, although Frances Dangerfield had had warning of his coming, and kept the fact to herself, as of no importance to the general community. Lord Redclove was set down at the entrance-doors an hour or

two after the funeral, and carefully assisted from his carriage by the prompt hands of his valet, whose services had become necessary now that gout had once more dropped, discourteously, upon the limbs of his lordship.

There was a stir amongst the company in the drawing-room as he shuffled in, a pale-faced, sharp-eyed, starchy individual, who bowed in that distant fashion which befits a peer of the realm thrown amongst the God-knows-whom. He and his valet were followed by a slim man in black, who proved to be Lord Redclove's solicitor, and who took his place at the back of the chair in which his lordship, with difficulty, ensconced himself, and looked from one face to another until he had grown familiar with the guests.

'In your interest, my dear Frances, I am here with my friend, Mr. Chavelot,' murmured Lord Redclove. 'You remember Mr. Chavelot, who drew up a deed of settlement some years ago, when——'

'I remember Mr. Chavelot,' said Frances, with a frigid bow to the solicitor; 'and I regret you

have seen the necessity to bring the gentleman with you.'

'Solely in your interest, my child,' said Lord Redclove again; 'there is no selfish motive actuating a step which costs me only pain and discomfort.'

'I am sorry to hear it, my lord,' answered Frances.

Father and daughter had not met since the announcement of the birth of an heir to the Redclove estates, and the promulgation of the fact of a secret marriage; and possibly Frances had not forgiven the deception. Still these were grave times, and the widow was grave to match. She had not wished for her father's presence; but, after all, it did not disturb her in any great degree. It was he who would be seriously disturbed in good time, and who, scenting trouble, or disaster, or confession, had come in hot haste to Ilvercombe.

Lord Redclove shrugged his shoulders at his daughter's remarks, and then sat back in his chair, as calm and placid as his gout would permit. Estelle, in her deep-black dress, came

across the drawing-room to greet him, and his face brightened a little as she leaned over him and kissed him.

'This is hardly a fitting scene for you, Estelle,' he said, in a low voice. 'Amongst this crowd of adventurers, you are sadly out of place.'

'Mamma wished me to be present.'

'Well—well—your grandmamma Dangerfield was very fond of you.'

'I—I hardly think so,' said Estelle, frankly; 'I saw so little of her during my life.'

'Very fond of you,' he insisted. 'When you were a child she absolutely doated on you, Estelle.'

He looked round the room again, peering keenly from beneath his shaggy white eyebrows.

'Who is the tall, fair girl in black, Estelle,' he said, 'to whom you were speaking just now?'

'Aggie—I mean Miss Challis.'

'Oh! Miss Challis—I have heard the name.'

'It was she who saved my life, grandpapa.'

'Who dragged you out of a pond about here? —ah! yes, some one wrote to me about that,'

remarked Lord Redclove; 'did you get very wet, child?'

'Yes, I was wet,' answered Estelle, quaintly.

'You might have caught your death of cold,' observed her grandfather. 'I wonder what we are waiting for?'

He—Lord Redclove—had arrived, and proceedings should surely not be unduly delayed, he considered; but the solicitor to the late Mrs. Dangerfield was very busy with the papers, and not prepared for the revelation.

'The place is a perfect Babel,' Lord Redclove said to *his* solicitor; 'I cannot understand the greed and rapacity of all these people. What did the old woman know of three-fourths of them in her lifetime to care what became of them after her decease?'

'It is a fine estate, my lord,' said Mr. Chavelot, in reply.

'Yes—in its way,' added his lordship. 'Do you see my nephew about, Chavelot? I am getting damnably short-sighted, and this mob confuses me.'

'No, I don't see him,' answered the solicitor.

'Hamilton Redclove is standing by the door, my lord,' said a deep voice, and Lord Redclove started at hearing it so close to him. He inclined his head slowly, without looking at the speaker, or without thanking him for the information thus suddenly volunteered, but when the chatter and argument, coarse jests, and noisy laughter—and there was a good deal of all that at last—were at their height, the head of Lord Redclove revolved slowly round in the voluminous white cravat he wore, and the keen grey eyes glinted under his brows at the young man who had spoken to him. It was Samuel Challis, who was standing close to his side, and whom his lordship had not seen in his life before. He knew him, though, by his likeness to the father, and he turned quickly away. The sight had disturbed him, and it was like one risen from the dead to find him at his elbow.

'Chavelot,' he said, in a low voice.

'My lord,' answered the solicitor.

'I did not know the son had been discovered.'

'What son, my lord?'

'Samuel Challis.'

'Where is he?'

'At my side. If it isn't he, it's the devil.'

'He has been sent for, then,' said Mr. Chavelot, after a glance at Sam Challis, in his turn; 'it is easy to guess what the will contains now.'

'Pray, silence, gentlemen,' echoed a voice from that part of the room where the deceased lady's solicitor was sitting, and then it became known that the time had come at last for the will to be read. On the crowd assembled there fell a sudden stillness that was remarkable, and the faces—most of them white, anxious, and eager—were all turned towards the man at the table, with the paper in his hands, and the wax lights burning on each side of him.

It was one of the shortest of documents, as well as one of the most surprising to the majority of those assembled. It gave and bequeathed all that the testator possessed, in real or personal estate, in houses, money, land, absolutely and for ever, to Agnes Challis, then resident with the Reverend Mr. Fayre, of the Vicarage, Grayling, and it constituted the Honourable Frances Dangerfield sole executrix to the will.

'And that's all!' shouted one red-faced man; 'not a word more?'

'Not a word more.'

'Then, damn it, say I!'

'No legacies whatever?' said a pale, middle-aged, shabbily-dressed man, who had spent many years of his life in inditing begging-letters to the deceased; 'dear me, how very aggra— extraordinary!'

'No legacies.'

'No codicil?'

'No codicil.'

'She was mad!—mad to the very end of her life!' raved another; 'it's a mad will altogether, or she would not have left me out.'

'Very mad,' Lord Redclove ventured to affirm. 'Here is a valuable property bequeathed to a stranger—her half-nurse, half-companion, for the last few weeks, I believe, and she whom the testator has wronged—wronged in herself and in her child—is constituted sole executrix by way of crowning injury.'

'By way of good faith,' said Frances Dangerfield, very firmly.

'I shall dispute the validity of the will in your interest—in Estelle's,' said Lord Redclove, very firmly also.

'We will all dispute it,' was the general chorus—'every one of us.'

Agnes Challis was calm and grave, and totally unmoved by her prosperity. The ravings of the disappointed did not affect her, only deepened the thoughtful look upon her face. Once, when a relative more angry and excited than the rest—having hoped for more, and on no tenable ground that was apparent—came close to her and shook his fist at her, crying, 'There has been jugglery in this, and I'll find it out,' she stepped back from him in alarm, and found that Hamilton was standing between her and the man who menaced her.

'You had better leave this house quietly,' Hamilton said to him, 'before I throw you out of the window.'

'Hush, hush!' cried Aggie; 'no quarrelling to-day, whatever is said—whatever they choose to think.'

There was a Babel of sound, a roar of angry

voices in high keys and deep, discordant basses —it was a loud, prolonged howl of discomfiture, with which one could not have credited respectable society, had he not seen how respectability *will* behave itself on similar occasions when a few lines on parchment or paper strike down every hope that has been based on the filling-in of a grave.

Lord Redclove was at his daughter's side again. He had forgotten his gout, and walked across the room unaided.

'Thank God you are executrix, Frances!'

'Why?' was the answer.

'You can do much. I will tell you presently.'

'I will do what is right,' said Frances.

'Exactly—of course,' replied her father. 'But even you, with all your eccentricity, cannot but see that this is a cruel and insane testament, levelled at us in mockery and hate, to make rich that designing young woman, and spite us from the old woman's coffin.'

'I see nothing of the kind,' was the flat contradiction proffered to her sire.

'What!'

'I see that this is a just will, and I will act upon it to the letter,' answered Frances Dangerfield.

'You are as mad as your husband's mother was,' hissed Lord Redclove, 'if you act for Agnes Challis against us.'

'*Us!*' echoed his daughter.

'To be sure. The property should be yours and Estelle's.'

'And, both dying before his lordship, there would be a fine prospect for him and his *son*,' said Hamilton, suddenly taking part in the conversation, to the surprise of both of them.

'Are you here, sir?' said Lord Redclove, drawing himself up very rigidly. 'I thought you had gone to Australia.'

'In good time, my lord.'

'Did *you* expect anything from the will, that you are hanging about here with the harpies?'

'Yes, I had my expectations with your lordship, but I bear my disappointments with philosophy. Lord Redclove,' he said, in a different tone, 'will you allow me to introduce you to my friend, Mr. Samuel Challis—an excellent

man—whose acquaintance I have had the honour to make within the last week?'

'No, no; I don't want to know any of your friends,' cried his lordship, in alarm. 'Chavelot, your arm—get me away from this gang, for God's sake!'

The solicitor offered his arm to Lord Redclove, and the valet, who had been grinning his head off at the turmoil for the last ten minutes, followed in the rear. There was a crowd to force a way through—a crowd far from complaisant, and streaming towards the door also—and one of its atoms planted a heavy boot on his lordship's bad foot, and elicited a roar of anguish, which would have been highly effective if there had been less noise in the room, and more consideration for aristocratic feeling. Into the night and the drifting snow—for it was snowing hard again in Ilvercombe—passed away his lordship and the lawyer; and the hungry, the penniless, the greedy, and the crestfallen drifted, like the snow, after them, and melted away into the darkness.

CHAPTER II.

AFTER THEY HAD GONE.

They were left together at last—the legatee and executrix—the only two persons whom old Mrs. Dangerfield had mentioned in her will, or had appeared to be on her mind at the time of her bequeathments. The relations had all departed, the friends had withdrawn, Hamilton and Samuel Challis were away, Estelle had gone to her room, wondering a little, but too young and with too little love of money at her heart to care for Agnes Challis's stepping into the property; and now Agnes and Frances Dangerfield were in their old positions by the fire, with

the one who used to watch them furtively away from them for ever.

'You do not seem elated by your good fortune,' said Frances Dangerfield, after they had sat some time in silence.

'I am not elated; this is not a time when I should feel much joy at anything,' was the answer.

'Still you are rich.'

'It would not have given me one pang if all the property had been yours,' Aggie replied; 'or had been thrown amongst that hungry crowd that has gone away railing at my duplicity. It will give me no pain if they contest the will, and win the day of me. I am not fond of money.'

'They cannot—they dare not contest it without my help; and I am your friend in this. You will trust me?' she asked.

'Why should I not?' said Agnes, taking the hand extended to her; 'she who died must have been sure you would be my friend.'

'Yes, she was sure of that,' was the moody answer.

'Mrs. Dangerfield, there was a reason for it. May I tell you what I think it is, and not offend you?'

Frances Dangerfield shrank back in her chair in some alarm.

'Not all your suppositions and suspicions. No,' she cried, 'pray, spare me!'

'Do you know what they will be, then?' Aggie said.

'I can guess, knowing who you are.'

'You are my friend, you say?' remarked Aggie, curiously.

'I call heaven solemnly to witness that I am,' was the reply.

'Thank you; only you seemed afraid of me just now,' said Agnes, thoughtfully.

'Afraid of what you might say. Yes,' she confessed, 'for there is one scene in the past which I can never look back at. Spare me, if you can, Agnes; I am not so strong a woman as I used to be.'

'Yes, you are weaker than I thought,' said Agnes, steadily regarding her; 'you have grown a weaker woman even in Warwickshire.'

'I have had much to try me,' stammered the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield. 'Estelle, for instance.'

'Ah! yes—Estelle,' said Aggie. 'Is she disappointed, too, I wonder?'

'Why should she be? I have enough money to leave her.'

'I suppose so—I don't know,' said Aggie, absently.

There was a long silence again.

'Of what are you thinking now?' inquired Mrs. Dangerfield, suddenly.

'Of the papers that should have been in the safe along with the will,' answered Aggie. 'Did not the poor lady tell you of the papers we were to read together?'

Mrs. Dangerfield's clasped hands tightened involuntarily, but she answered, in a calm, unbroken voice,

'I have not heard of any papers.'

'She would have told you of them had she lived twenty-four hours longer,' said Aggie; 'they were on her mind that night.'

'What papers did she say they were?'

'Papers of my mother and—of my father, before he knew you, Mrs. Dangerfield.'

'Indeed!' replied the widow.

'They would have explained the nature of the will,' she said.

'She might have imagined all this, or she might have destroyed them in the study a few minutes before she died.'

'Yes, she might have destroyed them,' murmured Aggie; 'I have thought of that.'

'To spare both our feelings, surely.'

'And yet to leave this will an incomprehensibility.'

'Why, is it incomprehensible to you?' asked the widow.

'Oh! not to me,' was Aggie's quick answer; 'it is all very clear to me, but the world will wonder at the wisdom of appointing as executrix the woman whose child is cut out of the inheritance.'

'She who has died was fond of you. That is our answer,' said the widow.

'It is a weak one.'

There was another pause, during which the

widow looked long and studiously at the fair girl by the fire—the heiress whom riches had depressed. Agnes Challis was not easily content, it was evident; wealth did not seem to pacify her. What did she know? what did she guess at? Why would she not accept her high position in a better spirit, and settle down to affluence with a grateful heart?

'Why is the will so very clear to you, Agnes?' asked the widow, somewhat timidly. 'Has it been explained to you? were you prepared for its contents?'

'I was not prepared for all her money.'

'But this will is no surprise to you?'

'No. It speaks of a sum paid me for my silence—the price for the papers that have disappeared, who knows?'

Ah! who knows? The Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's heart winced, but she had already become a clever woman at disguise; and, all that was at stake, no one knew better than she. Possibly she had not acted a wise part in refusing to listen to Agnes Challis's theory as to why she, Frances Dangerfield, had been constituted

executrix to the will. It might be well to know, at any cost to herself or her pride, all that was in the young girl's thoughts to cast so deep a shadow on her.

'A little while ago, Agnes, I implored you not to speak of the past to me,' she said, suddenly, 'but unless we talk of it freely—for this once and ever—it seems impossible to be the friends we might become. And I am your friend in everything now, if you will only let me be so.'

'I have not so many friends that I should turn away from you,' said Agnes, sadly, 'and Estelle is my half-sister, whom I love.'

'I am glad this money comes to you,' said Frances Dangerfield; 'I have not an atom's worth of envy in my heart concerning it. It is as a reparation of the wrong done your mother by my husband,' she added, suddenly.

This was a test phrase, and it had its effect. Aggie Challis sat back, with a heightened colour and a new expression on her face.

'Mrs. Dangerfield, I believed in my mother,' she cried.

'In what way do you mean?'

'In her honour and good-faith—in the truth of her story.'

'Well,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, with an effort, 'tell me what that story is, and let me judge it for myself. I shall be strong enough to bear it, and to point out where the error lies. We have fought too long against mutual confidence.'

Agnes hesitated, but it was not in distrust. She would spare this proud woman if she could, and she knew that her mother's history, without facts to back it, would seem like a wild dream. And yet, after all, it would account for much, and she might tell it to her briefly, and set herself, at least, in a clearer light.

'I have no evidence to help me,' Aggie said, 'I have been all my life seeking for it. I have been imprisoned in a wild effort to secure it, and I believe that I have been close upon it in this house.'

'Evidence of what?' asked her anxious listener.

'Madam, I shall pain you very much, and you will not believe me,' said Aggie, with excitement

now, 'but say this is for once and for ever then, and let me speak. I have shrunk back till now, even for my own sake, lady, knowing what a blow the truth would be to you—if this were really a truth that I could prove.'

'Go on,' said the widow, faintly, 'I guess what you are going to say, poor child. It is natural for you to think the best of the mother—it is charitable and kind.'

'I think, then, that my poor mother was married to Paul Dangerfield,' said Aggie, very firmly; 'that, when he met her in America, he loved her at least well enough to give her his name. My mother never told me that, even for her credit's sake, till she lay ill one day, and I had grown almost a young woman, and my father had been unkind and harsh in his reply to a letter which she had written to him begging for more help.'

'Your mother——'

'Pardon me, but let me finish,' said Aggie; 'my mother was of an eccentric, passionate, wild nature, acting not as other women would have done under similar troubles, but in all my life I

have no remembrance of her telling me a lie. She was a truthful woman.'

Frances Dangerfield did not contradict her again. She waited very patiently for the whole history, and sat a white, dumb statue facing her.

'She told me,' Aggie continued, 'that they were married in America, in an out-of-the-way little church that she could not remember then, and that it was a most unhappy match. They came to England shortly afterwards, keeping the marriage a secret, for his friends' sake, and his fortune's sake, until life should become less of an uncertainty with him. Then followed jealousy, and misery, and much injustice to my mother, until one day she stole away from him, taking the children with her.'

'And with Lord Esdaile for companion—I have heard that part of the story, poor child.'

'It was not true,' cried Aggie—'not a syllable of that report was true, I swear to heaven now. Lord Esdaile did not accompany my mother, who went abroad again, and who was reported to have died abroad. My mother always

loved Paul Dangerfield—from the beginning to the end she loved him, with all her wilful heart. When she came back to England years afterwards, and found that, believing in the report of her death, he had married you, she kept his secret at all cost to her good name. He wrote of the ruin it would be to him to own the truth, and she accepted from him an annual income, and held her peace, until he was hard and cruel, and her heart turned against him. All his letters to her—every proof that she possessed of the marriage in America—were in the hands of one she thought her friend, and it was this friend who was bought-over by your father and mine—perhaps by old Mrs. Dangerfield—to betray her. In endeavouring to secure the papers, I was arrested at Chester, and it was my father who, hearing from the mother of my arrest, was hastening to see her, and to save me, when the accident occurred which killed him.'

'Why did not your mother state this at the trial?'

'She was dying then in Derbyshire. Father and mother were both strangely past the power

of helping me by a single word. I was found in a house ransacking a bureau. I offered no explanation—I had been instructed to wait my trial patiently, and keep silence, for all sakes —and, when the trial came, I held my peace, and wondered where my friends were. There,' cried Aggie, 'that is my story, as well as my mother's, but it will explain the mystery that has been about my unlucky life.'

'A strange mystery and a strange history, Agnes,' commented Frances Dangerfield, 'and you have acted like a true woman in trusting in the mother. But that my husband ever married her you must not ask me to believe—it is irreconcilable with every action of his life.'

'Still I believe it,' murmured Agnes.

'Ah! that is natural, too,' answered the other; 'I honour you none the less for it, though it is a blow that strikes at me keenly. It may be well not to rob yourself of an illusion that holds your mother sacred in your eyes. It is as well that the past should lie back from you and me; and even were you right, and I deceived, what good could follow to either of us, and what

misery might not arise? Be content, Agnes, with the present, with the wealth your strange grandmother has bequeathed to you; and let us forget what may or may not have influenced lives that are no longer with us. Let us be friends—for Estelle's sake.'

She added this, and it was not till Estelle's name was mentioned that the face of Aggie Challis softened wondrously. Yes, for the sister's sake, it might be well to let the story rest. Who in the world would be likely to believe it, save one or two good friends who had believed in her from the first?

It was pleasant to be friends with Mrs. Dangerfield, to feel sure she had outlived all past dislikes, and that the clouds were clearing from the future. There was a supreme satisfaction in knowing that Estelle's mother was on her side, and would fight her battles against her own self-interest, and Aggie Challis could always believe her mother's history in her heart, and take the legacy bequeathed her as her birthright. She would be rich, and make others rich—Sam Challis, Dan Overdown, and one

other who had been kind to her, and whom the turn of fortune's wheel had left as poor as Job.

She wrote to Daniel Overdown, at Birmingham, late as was the hour before she bade good-night to Frances Dangerfield; informed him of her sudden rise to prosperity, hinted at the good she might do with the money, and the assistance she hoped to prove to all her friends. She was not exultant; her letter was tinged with regret for the loss of her father's mother; there was no shade of difference in her manner of addressing her lover, but in his little shabby house in Birmingham, the epistle came not as a comfort to him. She was away from him, rich now, and surrounded by rich friends, and he would have seemed further removed from her by the will, had she not been plighted to him. He was not elated at his good fortune—for hers was really his, and she was not a woman whom a man could doubt—and as he bent over the letter, and read it by the firelight, there were deep lines across his forehead, like a man deciphering an enigma, the solution of which might be a sting to him.

There was no mention of their marriage—though there was scarcely a reason for delay now—and there was a strong hint that he might wish for money shortly to set up in business for himself, and that he might call upon her to grant most readily every penny which she could spare for him and his success.

It was very kind, but she wrote like a woman grateful for the past, and not happy in her outlook at the future. Like a dear friend standing apart from him, and, despite her sympathy, really not as one looking forward to beginning life with him. But the times were early yet since their engagement and the rich woman's death, and he was never himself now. He was away from the woman he loved; and he had ceased to be happy in her absence.

CHAPTER III.

A CALL AT MR. FAYRE'S.

THE sudden death of the mistress of Ilvercombe Park had foiled many intentions for better and worse, retarded the actions of our characters, and sown the seeds of various changes.

Hamilton Redclove did not, as our readers are aware, take his departure to London on the morning that he had announced his intention of so doing. He was not required as escort for his cousin Frances, who had been asked by her father to remain as a spy in her own interest, and who, resenting advice, had, with woman-like contrariety, resolved to return to London immediately. He was in no hurry

to reach town on his account, and the death of old Mrs. Dangerfield had rendered him anxious to see—though surely this was no business of his—in what particular way the catastrophe would affect one in whom he felt a strong interest.

Hamilton Redclove remained at Grayling, keeping himself out of the way of the heiress, and out of the way of his cousins, until the day of the funeral, when he walked into the big drawing-room, and heard the will read, which made Aggie Challis rich, and walked out again without offering his congratulations.

He looked in at Mr. Fayre's to tell the news, and to inveigh against the greed of the relatives whom he had confronted; and he spoke bitterly against riches in general, as we wise folk, without much chance of them, are in the habit of doing. He foresaw trouble ahead too, and opposition to the will, and a hard fight for Aggie Challis. He did not believe in his cousin Frances sitting down to the loss with complacency, and he feared her power as executrix, should her pride or her cupidity resent

the last wishes of Paul Dangerfield's mother.

Therefore he waited in Grayling. He would be glad to know that Agnes Challis's position in life was secure before he went away; that he left her with many friends, and with not a single enemy in the world; and, when he learned that his cousin was anxious to carry out the contents of the will to the letter, he began to think that his wishes might come true, and he might leave her very safely. In his heart, he would have been glad of an opportunity to show himself her friend again, and in some way or other which even her troubles might bring about; but there were no troubles ahead, and no chance of demonstrating the intensity of his friendship.

The story was at an end, and it was time to go away. Aggie Challis would come into her rights, and marry Daniel Overdown. The man who had cared for her in her poverty and tribulation—and the man she cared for!—would be rewarded by prosperity, and by that love of hers, without which prosperity would not be worth having.

It was like a play, and it ended with the harmonious coupling of the characters. This was the fifth act, the green curtain was descending, and everybody was happy in the glare of the footlights, save himself—who was out of that little love-drama, and glowering at it enviously from a back-seat in the pit. He could not help feeling envious at times; he tried not, but there were many moments of failure. He was sorry Aggie was going to marry the gunsmith; for her sake only, he considered, until he discovered that he could not fix on any individual whom he or she had ever known that he would be glad to see her husband. She was better by herself, in the clear light of day about her, and as he had ever known her—what did she want to marry for, ere she had had time to look round, and to realise the change which her new world and her new position in it created? Not that she would change with the world, or that the gunsmith Overdown would not make her a good husband; but he could not reflect calmly upon the idea of Aggie Challis's coming marriage. It

was no business of his, still it made him miserable to think of it; it unsettled him disastrously.

He had become very friendly with the Fayres of late days, and he had taken an odd fancy for the society of Sam Challis, who, though rough and outspoken, was a man of intelligence, and whose stories of the new world constituted a greater temptation to his listener than he was aware of at the time. Besides, Sam Challis was an honest fellow, Hamilton considered, and had paid him back his two hundred pounds when money was of service to him, and Sam was going to a land where it was easy to earn more, the man being in the right groove, and able and industrious.

'Sam, you must take me with you,' he said one day, when they were both at the vicarage.

Samuel Challis had fallen into the habit of calling at the vicarage very frequently himself, and neither Mr. Fayre nor his daughter, especially his daughter, could understand why he dropped in so constantly.

'What—to America?'

'Yes.'

'You'll not care for roughing it in my part of the country,' said Sam Challis.

'I am not afraid of work.'

'There are your friends in England.'

'I haven't one friend from whom I shall be sorry to part,' said Hamilton.

'That's a compliment,' said Bella, with a mock curtsey, 'and my father and I are greatly obliged to you.'

'But will be glad to get rid of me, nevertheless,' answered Hamilton, with a little laugh; 'for I have been a terrible bore here, and very much in the way.'

'I know I'm in the way, too,' said Sam, thoughtfully; 'but I should like to see Aggie in possession of her property—to feel quite sure that there will be no opposition to the will, before I leave England for good. There's no one likely to miss *me*, at any rate.'

'Certainly not,' said Bella Fayre, very positively.

Sam looked at her, and reddened very much at her answer. She was saucy and sprightly,

and awfully pleasant company; he was afraid that he should miss *her* a little.

This was out-of-door talk in the big garden of the vicarage. It was a bright afternoon, with the air bracing and the sky bright; the mistress of Ilvercombe Park had been buried just a fortnight. It was striking two in the church tower, when two new-comers in deep mourning came upon the scene—Agnes Challis and Estelle Dangerfield. They had walked across the fields to the vicarage; that well-known short cut to Grayling that was ever memorable to Aggie Challis and to Hamilton Redclove.

'I thought you had deserted us in your prosperity, Aggie,' said Bella Fayre, after greetings had been exchanged, 'and forgotten even your poor friends in the village.'

'I hope I have not forgotten anybody,' answered Aggie.

'You two girls are just in time to say good-bye to Mr. Redclove, too,' said Bella, with eyes keenly watching the effect of her announcement; 'he is really on the eve of his departure

on this occasion—absolutely and positively arranging for his last appearance in Warwickshire.'

'Not going to leave us at once!' cried Estelle, very white on the instant at the announcement which Bella Fayre had made.

'Going—away—now!' said Agnes Challis, less impulsively, but with a rapid change of colour too.

'I have just asked Mr. Challis to take me with him to America,' said Hamilton. 'Your brother,' he added to our heroine, 'has drawn so bright a picture of the new world that the temptation is too great for me to withstand.'

'No one caring for him in the old world either, or, rather, no one existing in it to whom he shall be sorry to say good-bye. I believe,' said Bella, 'that was the polite way of putting it, Mr. Redclove.'

'Miss Fayre, you are incorrigible,' he said, petulantly, as he walked away from the group. He did not walk far, however; for, to his astonishment, Agnes followed him, and Bella, Estelle,

and Sam Challis strolled in another direction, as if by previous arrangement.

'I have told them I wanted to talk to you for a few moments,' said Agnes Challis very frankly, as she came up with him; 'shall I be encroaching upon your time, Mr. Redclove?'

'Not at all,' he replied, in mild surprise.

'I came over here, with Estelle, in search of you.'

'You are very good,' he murmured; 'does Estelle——'

'Know what I am going to say?—yes,' said Aggie, in reply.

He did not appear interested after this; he walked on moodily by her side, with his gaze directed to the frost-bound garden-path, and waited patiently for her to resume the conversation.

'You wrote a letter to your cousin Frances last night?' Aggie said.

He started.

'Did she show it you?' he inquired.

'She told me its contents,' Aggie replied; 'and I was interested in it. You wished to

know when the property was likely to be absolutely mine;—when it was perfectly certain there could be no opposition from the family. You were only waiting at Grayling—waiting in England—to make sure that there was peace for all of us, and then to proceed your own way in life, and seek your fortunes elsewhere.'

'That was the purport of my letter, certainly,' he said.

'Your cousin Frances did not gather from it, neither did I from her relation of its contents, that you contemplated that immediate departure of which Miss Fayre has apprised me this morning.'

'I am unsettled—I shall be only too glad to get away,' he confessed.

'I thought it was likely you might leave hastily,' said Aggie, 'and I came over in hot haste myself to see you.'

It was too frank a confession to make his heart thrill as with an avowal of her preference for him, her deep interest in him, but he regarded her with his old look of surprise.

'I am not going away to-day,' he said.

'Perhaps not;—but I thought—I felt that at any moment you might disappear, and the chance would never come to say all that was in my mind concerning you.'

'Proceed, Miss Challis; you puzzle me immensely,' he said, all curiosity now.

'You will not be offended with me, whatever I say? You will believe, Mr. Redclove, that it is in earnest and in good faith?'

'Yes.'

'This may be the last time you and I will meet—I think it *is* the last time,' said Aggie, 'and I wish to speak straightforwardly.'

'Not a word that you can say to me, not an announcement you can make, Miss Challis,' he replied, in a deep voice, 'but I will receive it in good faith, knowing it is honestly meant, and that it comes from you.'

Agnes Challis blushed at the earnestness with which he spoke, and dashed into the subject forthwith. It was time to explain, before fresh complications arose.

'Concerning Estelle, first of all,' she said,

very hurriedly; 'my half-sister, whom I love, and for whose future I would strive. You—you can leave her for ever, without a pang, then?'

'I am sorry to leave anyone whom I have known and respected; but yes, I can leave her without any deep regret?'

'She does not belong to your life?'

'God forbid!' was Hamilton's unceremonious answer.

'There's an end of it. You understand what I mean, there need be no disguise between us concerning that poor child.'

'Poor child, indeed!' muttered Hamilton, 'and she knows, you say, the object of your coming here.'

'No, no, not that,' answered Aggie; 'I have not stated the object of my coming yet.'

'Indeed,' said Hamilton, 'then your interest in Estelle and me is a sudden thought, as it were?'

'I wished, for Estelle's sake, to be quite sure——'

'Miss Challis, you might have been quite

sure some weeks ago, when we walked across the fields,' he murmured, half-reproachfully, 'and yet you torture me again to-day.'

'Forgive me,' murmured Aggie, 'I have never been quite sure, for you have never been quite frank with me.'

'True,' he responded, 'but I have nothing to forgive.'

There was a side-gate here entering upon those fields to which he had pointed, and they paused, hesitated, and then passed through together.

'I would rather they did not hear what I have to say to you,' said Agnes; 'shall we go a little way in this direction?'

'If you can trust me,' he said.

'I can trust you,' she replied, confidently.

'Thank you,' he said, 'but this is an unlucky spot—to me!'

CHAPTER IV.

'ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER.'

AGNES CHALLIS did not respond to the last remark of her companion. She was not quite certain that it was intended for her ears, his voice sank so low in the final utterance. Unlucky to him!—why should it be unlucky? she dared hardly ask herself at that time, and with the business of the day, the task she had set herself, upon her mind still.

'It is a very commonplace remark to say the world is full of change,' said Aggie, 'but it paves the way to my communication. Five or six years ago my brother and I were very poor, and you were, in our estimation and in your

own, a rich man, with bright prospects in life stretching out before you.'

'A man with so high an opinion of himself and his surroundings that he deserved to come to this,' Hamilton added.

'No; that is not true,' was Aggie's quick reply.

Hamilton smiled at this flat denial to his assertion, and shrugged his shoulders a little, but he was pleased immensely—pleased, in his heart, at the impulse which defended him against his own personal attack.

'We were very poor and you were rich,' said Aggie again, 'and, in the fulness of your heart, you helped us. Now that we are likely to be rich—for I class my brother with myself—we are anxious to help you.'

'Now that I am very poor,' he added.

'Yes; you have owned it.'

'Have your brother and you talked this little matter over?'

'Not yet. But I know I can speak for him,' was the reply.

'It is more consolatory to my feelings to hear you speak for yourself,' said Hamilton, in a

troubled voice; 'to listen to all you have thought out for me in my poverty.'

'I have thought how easy it would be for me to lighten your load in life.'

'Oh, yes!' he cried. 'I know that—I feel that—but not with your money. Forgive me again,' he said, in a different and colder tone, 'but your offer of pecuniary support has unnerved me more than I can tell you—I am less of a stoic than I thought I was.'

'Yes, yes; I was afraid myself——' and then Aggie turned in the direction of the vicarage again, and, as he turned with her, his dark face fell into shadow.

'You were afraid of *me*,' he said; 'experience had assured you already that I was thoroughly untrustworthy.'

'No; don't think that.'

'And I am. I am not to be trusted with you,' he said, almost fiercely; 'let us get back to the parson's garden as soon as we can.'

'There was not to be a word of satire or an unkind word between us to-day,' said Agnes, very gently.

'I have not spoken satirically or in unkindness,' he replied; 'I am not to be trusted, so help me, Heaven!'

'Still I trust you,' answered Aggie, confidently; 'you trusted me in the face of a dark mystery, and I have faith in you—I always had.'

'I will never abuse it by telling you what mystery is at my heart to make all this a dream,' he cried; 'pray go on. Let us finish this talk of the money which you want to waste upon me.'

'I claim my right to help you, Mr. Redclove,' said his companion, very firmly; 'and I deny your right to turn away from any assistance I may proffer you. You have laid Sam and myself under a lasting obligation, and you cannot pain us by saying you will have no help at our hands.'

'You speak as if I were a pauper—a man struggling for a day's bread,' said Hamilton, 'when I have money at command.'

'The money which Sam returned to you.'

'Well, yes.'

'And which must go to pay your debts in town,' she continued.

'How do you know I have any debts?'

'Your cousin Frances knows; she has heard it from Lord Redclove.'

'Oh, hang Lord Redclove! I beg pardon for anathematising my uncle in your presence, but I see now that he has been sneering at me and my poverty.'

'Which I respect. Mr. Redclove,' she urged, 'you do not, you cannot, guess how these riches will weigh me down, if you will not let me be grateful in my turn, and if those whom I would help pass from me in their pride, and crush me with their scornful independence.'

'Not scornful, Aggie,' he said, quickly. 'God forbid that.'

For the second time in his life her Christian name had escaped his lips, and thrilled her coming from them. She looked, in a scared manner, at him; and he said, half apologetically,

'I am not myself this morning, your kindness has confused me; but, if I say "No" to all your generous heart has prompted you to offer, it is

not in obstinacy or pride—at least, in that pride which in any way wounds yours.'

'You have no right to say "No,"' persisted Aggie, half angrily, half sorrowfully.

'I think I have,' he answered, very gently, 'for I am not so desperately poor, so deplorably reduced in circumstances, that the time has come for you to save me. A man is always at his best when he can help himself—he is braver and brighter; and you would only cast me down instead of give me courage.'

'But——'

'I shall go abroad in a few days possibly, with your brother Sam,' he continued, interrupting her. 'I have a craving for a new life in the Western States, and money is not wanted there so much as stout hands and stout hearts.'

'Hard work is not fitting for you.'

'Why? It is hard work which will do me good, and of which I am not afraid,' said Hamilton. 'It will cure me of all past follies and useless ambitions; it will set one disappointment of my life at a greater distance from me.'

Agnes shivered, and her heart felt like a dead weight within her.

'I did not think the loss of your position would have been so great a disappointment as all this,' she murmured; and then she was sorry that those words had escaped her, for she had not believed in them for an instant. She had wished to convey the meaning that she had misunderstood—had never comprehended—what his disappointment in life might be. Surely, she asked herself, it was not possible for her to read all that was in his heart, and to take it to her own!

She was very sorry she had implied that his disappointment, in her estimation, must mean his loss of title and estates. He was regarding the grass at her feet very gravely as he said,

'Men do not fall from affluence with an easy grace at any time—they are naturally disappointed at all which comes between them and their selfishness. Still,' he added, looking into her fair face intently, 'you must not make me selfish again by offering money before I am in need of it. I am none the less your debtor

because I cannot accept it—none the less grateful for the generous impulse which has led you to my rescue—none the less your true and faithful friend.'

He held his hands towards her, and she took them without a fear of him.

'God bless you!' he murmured, 'and thank you—thank you, a thousand times—for all you would do to help me.'

'And if at any time you want help?'

'I will come to you—there!'

'That is a promise,' cried Aggie.

'Yes. And failing to want help'—his hands tightened strangely in her own—'it is good-bye, and I shall never see your face again in all my life!'

'What do you mean?' Aggie gasped forth.

'I shall leave Grayling this evening—I am no use here—I have made up my mind at last. Good-bye,' he cried.

'Good-bye, but——'

'Aggie, this *is* good-bye,' he said, still clinging to her hands, and with all his love reflected in his changing looks. 'Never to see you in all

my life again—you heard me say that—and it is God's truth, I think. Good-bye; pity me for once!'

He drew her by her hands more closely to him, and she did not resist him wholly. There was a greater spell than her strong will against it to take her by a faltering step towards him, and strip the veil from the unreality her life was. He *was* going away for ever, and she was scared by the truth, and less of a heroine.

He kissed her with his quivering lips, and she did not shrink from them. She turned away with the tears blinding her suddenly with their force, but it was when his hands had released hers, and they had parted for good.

For the good, at least, of Daniel Overdown, who was tramping across the fields towards them once again.

CHAPTER V.

BELLA SPEAKS OUT.

Agnes Challis returned slowly to the vicarage —the mission was accomplished; it had been a total failure, and it was time to be gone. She had entered the garden by the wicket again, as a woman might pass out of Paradise into the dark world lying beyond it—everything had changed with her, she had opened her eyes, at last, to the truth, and it was hard to bear. These after-days, which should have been to her the best and brightest of her life, were full of gloom and misery; the consciousness of all that she had lost, of all that she had promised, of all the hopes that her own acts had cut her

adrift from, was weighing her down with a force beyond her power to cope with. She was firm and grave as she passed into the garden, but her heart was very weak and womanly.

Bella Fayre and Samuel Challis were walking up and down the broad garden conversing together with an earnestness that at another period would have been matter for surprise to the young woman advancing, but Estelle Dangerfield was not with them.

'Where is Estelle?' asked Agnes.

'Have you not met her?' rejoined Bella; 'she wished to join you—to add her persuasions to your own, thinking they might have more weight with Hamilton.'

Bella laughed merrily at this; but there was no change on the set features of Agnes Challis.

'Has she told you then?' began our heroine.

'Oh, yes, everything,' said Bella, interrupting her; 'when her heart is full, every little secret comes from it. How strange you did not meet her!'

'How long has she been gone?'

'Five minutes, perhaps, not more.'

'She must have seen us,' murmured Aggie to herself; 'what will she think? what will she say?'

'I suppose this was no secret, Aggie, which you wished to keep from me?' asked her brother, a little anxiously.

'No, Sam; but I would have preferred to tell you myself presently.'

'It's no business of mine,' he said, carelessly; 'still, I do not like to be quite out of your confidence, for the little time I stay here.'

'I cannot bear reproach to-day, Sam—spare me, please!' she said, faintly.

'You are ill!' cried Bella.

'No, no, I am well enough, but I shall be glad to get home.'

'Aggie,' said Sam, 'I can see your mission has been a failure. I could have told you that it would have been, had you asked my advice two days ago. He is an awfully proud fellow.'

'Yes, I knew that.'

'But I like him. I shall be glad if he goes back with me to America.'

'He spoke to me of going,' said Aggie, wondering more and more.

'Though he's not fitted for the rough work of the backwoods, for clearing land, sheep farming, and so forth, still, he's no fool,' Sam Challis remarked, 'and I'm proud of his friendship. You offered him money, Aggie?'

'Yes; I should have known better; but his cousin told me how very poor he was, and I did not know what to do. I thought,' she added, sadly, 'that a favour from me would have been less like a favour, considering the past.'

'Ay, considering the past, but then he is not the same man we met in it, girl.'

'What would you have done, Sam?' his sister asked.

'Heaven knows! Left him alone, for a time, at all events; not dashed at him in a hurry.'

'I wish I had now; and yet, no—I don't,' she said, very irrelevantly. 'You do not blame me, Sam?'

'You are your own mistress. Blame you, for what?'

'For offering him the money that will be ours presently,' she replied.

'That will be yours,' said Sam, with emphasis; 'for I cannot share it with you, girl. I am going to make my own fortune.'

'Ah!—well,' said Aggie, wearily, 'I cannot argue with you concerning this money now. I am tired of the talk of it. I wish Estelle would come back.'

'Will she, do you think?' asked Bella.

Agnes started. There was a peculiar expression on the face of the clergyman's daughter that suggested something more.

'She will not return home without me, surely?' Aggie said.

'I don't know. She is a singular girl, and she went away in a hurry, after standing some time at the wicket there.'

'I will go in search of her,' said Aggie, nervously, 'I shall overtake her, very shortly.'

'This is a runaway visit, but I don't like to detain you,' Bella answered.

She walked rapidly to the side of our heroine, and Sam Challis, fancying he was not

wanted just then, turned in another direction.

'Aggie,' said Bella, with great excitement, when they were side by side together, 'Estelle Dangerfield is a little fool, and that's all about it!'

'Hush! What has she done?'

'I don't know; but she broke away from us, and went to watch you and Hamilton. I hope she caught the pair of you love-making in earnest—it would serve her right, for thinking of a man who never dreamed of her.'

'You must not speak like this—and to me!' cried Aggie Challis, indignantly: 'you have no right!'

'Yes, I have, because I love you too much, darling, to see you throw yourself away upon that gunsmith. Because you love Hamilton Redclove, and he loves you, and neither of you can help it, thank goodness!'

'Oh, Bella, Bella, don't!'

'I will not say another word, only I hope it is not too late.'

'Too late for what? I am engaged to Daniel Overdown. You—you have no right to talk

to me in this way!' said Aggie, rebelliously again.

'There, I have done. Good-day. Fight this out with Estelle Dangerfield, not with me. It's not my affair!' and the excited young lady shut the wicket after Agnes Challis, and went back to the brother.

'Look here, Sam Challis,' she said, fearlessly; 'this is a nice muddle, and I told you how it would be before your sister came back. And you profess to be fond of her!'

'Fond of her, yes; but what can I do?'

'Tell Daniel Overdown the truth, and not let her throw herself away. If you don't, I will. And if I have to do it——'

'Well?'

'Then I'll never speak to you again!'

'But if she likes Dan?'

'Get out—she does not!'

'I believe she does,' said Sam, thoughtfully.

'You don't know anything about these things,' cried Bella, contemptuously. 'She is making herself miserable, and others miserable, and you must stand up for your sister.'

'The next time I see Dan Overdown, I'll have a little serious talk with him,' said Sam, after a minute's further consideration of the case.

CHAPTER VI.

DESPAIR.

AGNES CHALLIS did not overtake Estelle in the homeward route to Ilvercombe. Across the fields there was no sign of her. There was a sense of fear at the heart of the new mistress of Ilvercombe that all was not well with Estelle Dangerfield, and that the beginning of fresh cares would date from that visit to the vicarage. She was unhappy herself now;—she had parted with Hamilton Redclove for good, and the discovery had come to her with overwhelming force that the man loved her, and was unhappy because he had lost her. He had seemed to belong to another sphere than hers, until love had

levelled all distinctions, and he had betrayed his secret. If she had only known it earlier—if she had had the faith to believe in him more—if she had not been wilfully blind throughout, and groped on in the darkness to this bitterest of discomfitures! But she had not known all the truth till that day, and now she had brought misery to many in a wild effort to be grateful to one. She had turned friends to enemies, and the fitful light, that had shone of late days on her path, would die out in a denser darkness than the first had been. What was to follow this she could not guess, but that the troubles were closing round her it was easy to perceive. Well, it was her life throughout, perhaps, and as it began it would end. God knows, she had fought hard to do her best, and, now, God help the failure she had been!

And Estelle, the half-sister, what were her feelings on awakening also to the fact that Aggie Challis and Hamilton Redclove loved each other in real earnest? It is Estelle, weak and wilful, to whom we turn at this crisis in the fates of many of our characters. She had been

witness to the parting between those two to whom her heart had been drawn; she had seen from the distance their earnest conversation, their excitement, their first and last embrace—token of the strong affection which had betrayed itself in that hour. She had seen their lips meet in a passionate, tearful parting, and from that moment she hated both of them. Until then she had had a faint hope of winning Hamilton; her poor little vanities had long since sided with her love, and made excuses for years of unappreciation. She had seen less clearly through the glass than Aggie Challis. This awakening was a terrible ordeal, for she had been lacking in that moral strength which had carried the half-sister safely over the quicksands. In trouble Aggie Challis was strong, and at her best; whilst Estelle was only a weak, fretful child, whom disappointment crushed utterly.

Aggie had passed her in the fields, for Estelle had crouched under the hedgerows, fearing to encounter her, or to trust herself with a word. She was mad with despair, and knew not what

to do. The weak, delicate girl had become a fury beneath the consciousness of the deceit which she believed now had been practised on her from the first. She had been made a dupe, her love-secrets had been lured from her—she who had never been able to keep a secret in her life!—and a cruel, crafty girl had profited by it to her own advantage. Agnes Challis had stolen her lover from her, and left her without a hope in the world. Was there any of the madness of the grandmother at the brain of this excited girl, who raved of wrongs and infidelity and misplaced affection as though she had been Hamilton's affianced wife. She was very weak; it had never been her task to understand the world, its temptations and trials. She had lived on in a world of her own, and had set her heart on a man who had never cared for her—one of the wildest errors that a poor woman can commit.

The twilight deepened round her whilst she was pacing the fields, irresolved what to do. She was an injured woman, whose confidence had been abused, and she could not, would not,

go back to Ilvercombe. Under the same roof with Aggie Challis would be torture insupportable. She arrived at this resolution when she was half-way towards Ilvercombe, and she hurried back with swift steps in the direction of the vicarage, thinking that with Bella Fayre there would be companionship—perhaps solace. She paused when the vicarage was near, and hesitated once more. Bella Fayre had never understood her, had treated lightly her little spasmodic confessions and sentimentalities, had laughed at her, even if in a good-tempered way at which it was impossible to take offence. She could not face Bella Fayre just now; she could not own to anyone how she had been deceived. There was no one to understand her or to heed her. Her mother would talk religion to her, and she seemed past all the comfort that it could give to her mind; she was as much afraid of the mother as of the rest of them.

She turned back for the third time; it was almost dark night when she was within fifteen yards of the lake from which Aggie Challis had

saved her. Saved her for what? What was her life worth?—why should she be indebted for it to one who had so cruelly deceived her, and when every chance of peace was gone for ever?

It is doubtful whether her courage or despair would have carried her to the end of the project which she suddenly conceived, and which took her with rapid steps towards the lake, but there was enough of decision and of desperation in her actions and gestures to alarm one who was coming at a smart pace across the darkening fields. The traveller saw the sheet of water lying sullen and half-frozen under the leafless trees, and the woman running towards it with outstretched hands. Here was surely danger which it might be possible to avert. He called to the figure, which ran the faster at the sound of his voice, and, failing to arrest its progress, he set forth in pursuit. He was a man very swift of foot, and, despite the advantage which Estelle had of him, he caught up to her on the brink of the lake, put his arms quickly round her, and set her adroitly beyond the temptation

of death, standing between it and her, and looking at her very intently through the night shadows, which were thick about them.

'Why do you interfere with me? why do you stop me?' Estelle cried, indignantly.

'My poor woman, is it so great a trouble that you would end it in that awful fashion?' he inquired; 'have you been brought up no better than this?'

Estelle turned from him. She was ashamed of the impulse which had taken her to the water's-edge—ashamed of herself and of this man's reproof, terribly afraid even of his recognising her, as his voice grew familiar to her, although she could not tell yet who he was, or where she had met him.

The new-comer was sharp-eyed, and quick to discover her. As she moved away, he kept step with her, looking hard into her face.

'It is Miss Dangerfield, I think—I am sure,' he said, after a moment's further study of her features.

'Well—yes—it is Miss Dangerfield,' said Es-

telle, almost defiantly; 'and you will leave me, please.'

'Will you promise to go straight home?'

'Yes.'

'I am going your way. I am one whom you may possibly remember.'

'No,' said Estelle, without looking at him.

'My name is Overdown.'

'Ah,—yes—I remember now. Daniel Overdown, of Birmingham.'

'The same.'

'How strange! How like a fate to meet you!'

'Fate!' he said, contemptuously; 'is not that the old cry of your grandmother?'

'Yes, she believed in fate, and with good reason,' answered Estelle.

She walked on sullenly in the direction of Ilvercombe, with this man keeping guard, as it were, over her; keeping step with her, too, and still with his persistent stare, half of amazement and half of curiosity.

'At any rate, I don't know what fate has to do with our meeting this evening, Miss Danger-

field,' he said, when they were some distance from the lake; 'I call it good luck that brought me to you at the nick of time.'

'Did you think I was going to drown myself?' she asked, with a short laugh.

'It looked something like it.'

'I should have stopped in time; I am a great coward,' said Estelle.

'People are generally cowards who try to slip out of life in that fashion,' replied Daniel Overdown; 'but why you should have had such an idea puzzles me tremendously.'

'Why puzzles you?'

'Because you are young, rich, and have many friends.'

'I haven't a friend in the world,' cried Estelle.

'There's Aggie, to begin with. She speaks of you as——'

'Don't tell me what she says,' cried Estelle, turning on him fiercely; 'don't mention her name to me. I hate her!'

'Eh?' said Daniel, still more perplexed by an outburst which Estelle had found impossible to

restrain; 'has there been a quarrel between you two—of all women?'

'There has been no quarrel between us.'

'Pray explain,' he said, fretfully; 'I am a bad hand at riddles.'

'It is not for me to explain,' she said, more loftily, and more after the fashion of her mother.

'Pardon me, but I think it is,' replied Daniel Overdown, with great gravity; 'you speak disparagingly of one who is very dear to me, and one whom I cannot allow to be traduced even by a word. Miss Dangerfield, you know in what relation I stand to Agnes Challis?'

'Poor fellow—yes,' she murmured in reply.

'What the deuce have you got to pity me for?' he blurted forth, unceremoniously.

'Ask Agnes; tell her what I have said,' cried Estelle, with increasing passion. 'Find out your own troubles, for I have enough of my own to bear, heaven knows.'

'Heaven knows you are an awfully excitable young woman. I cannot in my conscience go away until I leave you in safe hands,' said Dan Overdown.

'I am safe enough,' answered Estelle.

'You talk as if something serious had happened to shake your faith in one of the best girls in the world,' Dan continued, thoughtfully; 'but then you talk a heap of nonsense. My confidence is not likely to fail at the same time as yours.'

'It *is* likely,' cried Estelle. 'You are deceived, as I have been; but you are a strong man, and will not give way like me.'

'Well, no; I shall not give way after your fashion, whatever may be the news waiting at Ilvercombe,' answered Daniel Overdown. 'I don't think the worst of news would make a baby of me—quite. Floundering about helplessly and raving of my wrongs would not be in my line at any period, I take it. Oh, no.'

He laughed at the idea of his giving way in any fashion, and Estelle did not admire his self-complacency. If he were strong enough to bear the blow impending, why, so much the better; she knew little of him, and did not sympathise with him in any degree. His confidence in himself was built upon his faith in Aggie

Challis, of whom he would not think any harm; when he awoke to the truth, it might be a different matter altogether, despite that philosophy of which he was vain. At all events, she would be no party to the deceit by which he suffered with herself. The truth was best for all of them now, and they were close upon it.

They were nearing Ilvercombe; they could see the lights from the windows shining out into the night. Daniel Overdown's quick ears, too, caught the sound of voices approaching them.

'Some one is coming,' he said.

'I do not hear anything,' answered Estelle.

'Before they are close upon us—friends probably in search of you—have you anything more to say?' asked Dan Overdown, earnestly.

'No. It is not my place.'

'You have charged the woman who is going to be my wife, with want of faith both to you and me. That is a grievous accusation, Miss Dangerfield. Think once more, if it is not likely to be founded upon error?'

'Impossible,' was the quick reply.

'She will answer for herself 'and convince you how unjust you are,' said Dan Overdown.

'I have no questions to ask her,' cried Estelle, indignantly. 'I hope that never in all my life I shall speak to her again. I pray that——'

'Hush, hush, girl, you are not yourself; you don't know what you are saying, and that's the reason for all this, I suppose. Here they are; let me be peacemaker,' he said, kindly.

There were two or three servants, with torches, approaching, and a step or two in advance of them were the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield and Agnes Challis.

'No, no, I will not face them,' said Estelle, shrinking back.

She would have darted away, had he not caught her by the wrist and held her very tightly a prisoner.

'We will see this to the end together, if you please,' he murmured.

CHAPTER VII.

PHILOSOPHY AT A DISCOUNT.

Daniel Overdown and his charge waited for the expedition which was setting forth in search of Miss Dangerfield. There had been little time lost after Agnes Challis had discovered that Estelle had not reached Ilvercombe; there had been an uneasy feeling of danger oppressing Agnes, and this had been quickly communicated to the mother—a woman whose nerves had given way of late days.

'I don't think anything *has* happened,' Aggie had said, assuringly to Frances Dangerfield; 'but I can't rest till I have found her. I will go back again.'

'I will accompany you,' said the mother.

The servants had been mustered to join them, and in the first field it was discovered that there had been a great deal of premature fright and unnecessary excitement, as amongst a parcel of women there generally is, thought more than one of the domestics who had been enlisted into the service.

'Estelle,' cried Agnes, and then she looked at her companion, and gasped forth, 'Dan,' in her new astonishment.

'Estelle, my dear child, where have you been?' exclaimed the mother, folding her to her breast; 'we were getting alarmed, and coming in search of you.'

'I was not worth discovering,' was the apathetic answer; and the new-comers became aware that there was something very wrong with Estelle. There were no inquiries as to the cause at that time; the position was acknowledged and the trouble tacitly accepted for the nonce. The servants were dismissed, the torches extinguished, and the three women and one man walked back to Ilvercombe, and did

not speak a word until they were in the drawing-room looking at each other.

Daniel Overdown was the first to break the spell of a long silence.

'There has been an odd sort of misunderstanding between these young folk,' he explained to the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield, 'and a word or two will set it right, and make us comfortable. I don't know what it is—I can't guess what it is, I won't try,' he added, decisively; 'but if Miss Dangerfield will speak out, as she has spoken out to me, I'll back my existence that Aggie gives her an answer that will satisfy her. That will satisfy the four of us, all deeply interested, and completely in the dark until the light of truth puts suspicion to the blush a bit.'

'Suspicion,' murmured Aggie.

'Ay; it's a nasty word, girl. But Miss Dangerfield has been so much in earnest, that I have been angry with her in your defence, perhaps have been too harsh, considering she is not herself to-day,' said he.

'I have nothing to say,' cried Estelle, defiant-

ly; 'I do not wish for any explanation. There is nothing can explain away the duplicity of that woman and—and Hamilton.'

'Hamilton!' exclaimed the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Oh, take me away from this house, and from her. Come with me to my room, mamma, pray come!' Estelle pleaded.

'Yes, she had better come with me,' said the mother. 'Presently we can talk of this more calmly.'

'I would deny this charge at once, Aggie,' suggested Dan Overdown, 'before they go away, for your own sake and mine.'

'I have deceived no one,' Aggie said, thus appealed to, 'nor sought to deceive. I wished to help one who had been kind to me in old days, and he refused my help.'

'Hamilton Redclove?' said Dan.

'Yes.'

'Whom you love!' cried Estelle; 'who took you in his arms, and kissed you; I saw you both, I tell you. There!'

It was the parting shot of a rival terribly

jealous, and it did not fail in its effect. Agnes Challis turned very white, and attempted no further defence—uttered not a single word of protest or denial. Her explanation was not for the Dangerfields in that moment, but for the strong man who had dropped into the chair by the fireside, and covered his face with his scarred hands. Mother and daughter went out of the room, and left them together.

This was the ordeal that Agnes had feared and foreseen, but had not gathered strength to encounter. She approached him very timidly, and drew his hands down from his face; she bent over him with eyes glistening with tears.

'You will forgive me, Dan,' she murmured.

'Is it all true, then?' he asked, wonderingly, and without raising his eyes to her.

'Is what all true?' she asked, like a woman anxious to gain time.

'That he kissed you—that fellow?' Dan said, hoarsely.

'Yes,' she faltered forth. 'He was going away for ever; he was grateful for all I wished to do to help him; it was in a moment of

excitement, of forgetfulness, if you will. I have been to blame, Dan.'

'You own it!' he exclaimed.

'But he was going away for good,' she said, as if in extenuation again; 'and I was unnerved and off my guard.'

'Damn him!' ejaculated Daniel Overdown.

'No, no; don't say that,' cried Aggie.

'I say, damn him,' Daniel Overdown said again, vindictively. 'Would you have me go down on my knees, and pray God for his safety, just as you will do to-night?'

'Oh! why should I not?'

'You love him,' he cried, with his clenched hand falling heavily on the arm of the chair in which he sat; 'why don't you say so, and finish me!'

'No one has a right to ask me such a question,' cried Aggie.

'I have.'

'No!'

'He has asked you himself; is that it?'

'He has not done so.'

'He has told you he loves you?' cried Dan,

pouring in question after question in his jealous rage.

'No, Dan, he has not; really!'

'He has shown you he loves you—you know he has. My God! haven't you deceived me enough, without attempting to blind me to the truth?' he exclaimed.

'I cannot tell you what the truth is,' she wailed forth. 'Oh, Dan, dear Dan, don't be hard upon me. I am like a woman in a dream.'

'I am like a dazed fool waking out of one,' he groaned; 'and there is only one thing plain to me.'

'What is that?' she asked, timidly.

'That you never cared for me; that there never was a scrap of honest love for me in your heart,' he answered.

'I have always looked up to you, Dan, and loved you very much——'

He started, and turned towards her for an instant; then he looked away from her as she continued—

'But it was a love I did not understand, and that, I knew, was not like your own. I said so

—I told you so on the day you asked me to become your wife. Don't you recollect?'

'Yes; I recollect very well,' he muttered.

'I asked for time, you know,' she said, very gently and soothingly; for this man's agony of disappointment was something terrible to witness; 'for I trusted in time strengthening that affection which I always had for you, and I thought that it would be in my power to make your life a happy one. It was the task I set myself at any sacrifice.'

'Ay, at any sacrifice,' he echoed, bitterly.

'I would have died to spare you this pain,' she said, with her arm round his neck caressingly; 'to keep that good opinion of me which you had, and which I have so completely lost. I am not intentionally ungrateful, Dan; if I have deceived you, I have deceived myself no less. Forgive me, if you can.'

'It is not easy to forgive a blow which strikes down every hope a man had,' he answered, moodily.

'Other hopes will come—other——'

'Don't console me,' he exclaimed, fiercely;

'don't tell me what is in store for a fellow cast down as low as I am.'

'Very well,' said Aggie, meekly.

'Are you prepared to keep your word—to marry me?'

'Can you wish it now?' she said, in a low tone of astonishment, of horror.

'I ask for the fulfilment of your promise—why not?' he said, sternly. 'You profess to be grateful for all I have done for you—well, I tax that gratitude, instead of the love you pretended to have for me. I can't live without you.'

She walked slowly from him, and stood at a little distance away, regarding him nervously.

'You must not call on me to lead you to his arms,' he continued; 'I am not the hero of a play-book, to give up my chances for the other man—I think of myself first in this.'

'That is not like you, Dan,' she murmured.

'If you choose to say to me, "I break my word and break your heart as well," why, say it!' he cried; 'it is only a woman's word, and not worth much.'

'Oh! Dan.'

'Your friends will say, too, "How wise the woman was to drop her old acquaintance, when the riches came that set her above him!"'

'Dan, can you think it was the money?' she cried, with fresh excitement.

'Yes.'

'Oh! cruel.'

'I can think anything of you,' he answered, and it was the bitterest answer of all.

It held her speech-bound for a while, then she gave way, and spoke out, with flashing eyes and heaving breast.

'I will keep my word—I *will* marry you,' she cried; 'all that I promised I will perform, for your sake and your happiness, if it can come after this awful night of explanation. You must not talk like this or think like this of me. YOU SHALL NOT DO IT!'

'You mean it?' he cried, eagerly.

'Yes.'

'When will you marry me, and end these accursed doubts?' he asked, eagerly.

'At once.'

'Next week?'

'Yes, next week, if you will,' she answered, wearily.

'It is a bargain,' he said; 'it is the one hope left me, after all, and I hold you to it.'

'I will not break away from anything I have promised you,' she replied, very firmly.

'Thank you,' he said; then he rose from his chair, took her hands, and kissed her on the forehead, she standing still and passive and rigid beneath his strange caress.

'I have been very rough with you, Aggie,' he said, hoarsely; 'but I am a rough fellow when I don't have it my own way. You have seen the worst of me to-night, but I did not think you cared for me at all. I will go now. Good-night.'

'Good-night.'

'I shall see you to-morrow?'

'Yes—to-morrow.'

He went from the house forthwith, letting himself out of the great doors into the broad carriage-drive beyond. Under the dark trees of the avenue, he came to a full stop, as though

a new thought, a new impulse, had come to him also. Then he went on again, with his head bent very low. She would keep her word and marry him, and he should get the better of his rival, as he deserved to do, but he was not happy yet with the consciousness of victory. His sober common-sense, he thought, had triumphed over a sickly sentimentality that would have ousted him from his prize, but in the hour of his success his heart was heavy enough.

CHAPTER VIII.

AFTER THE VICTORY.

Daniel Overdown proceeded to the inn at Ilvercombe, where he expected to find Samuel Challis, and astonish him not a little with the news that he was going to marry his sister next week. But there was no one to astonish at the inn; Sam had not returned, and Dan Overdown was left to his own company, which was not pleasant company, on that particular evening.

Left to himself, he began to think he had been in an unnecessary hurry to quit Ilvercombe Park—that it would have been a cleverer move on his part to remain, and console Aggie, and

cheer her up to the best of his ability, now that matters had been finally settled between them. It began to impress his mind forcibly and uncomfortably, too, that he had almost extorted from her a promise to marry him—that he had taunted and driven her to it—and then had left her without any attempt at consolation. He almost made up his mind to return; he had seized his hat even, and thrust it over his brows, when the second thought came to him that it would be better to leave well alone. He had triumphed in his argument; he had subdued the girl whom he loved, and whose life he was sure would be happy with him presently, and it would be wiser to stay where he was than to resume a topic with her that was essentially dangerous. A few words might turn victory into defeat, after all; for he was dissatisfied with his triumph, and the ugly black fact remained to confound him that Aggie loved another man better than him. She had not owned it; she had, with all a woman's adroitness, darted away from the question, but the grim truth remained that she had not expected he would hold her to

her word, and that she would have been glad if he had said, 'We will talk no more of marriage between us—it is a mockery of affection and confidence, and there's an end of it.'

If it had not been for this Hamilton Redclove turning up again in Warwickshire, what a different state of things!—what a life without a doubt from beginning to end!—what happiness with the one dear woman who had thought so much of him, and been so grateful for past kindness.

It was all that man! He had made love to Aggie, and stolen her heart away. He was younger, handsomer, a man of education, ostensibly a gentleman, and the Birmingham gunsmith did not show well in contrast with him, nay, went back into the shadow of his streets as the other advanced into the foreground. He should kill that man yet, Daniel Overdown thought, as he struck his clenched fist on the table—here was a world of women for a lord's nephew to chose from, and he must try to snatch this one poor girl away from him.

'Mr. Overdown,' said a voice at his side, and the thinker looked up in his surprise at the man

who had entered the room without disturbing the reverie into which he had fallen.

It was the rival whose presence in Warwickshire had worked such utter mischief.

'You here!' he ejaculated.

'You here in Ilvercombe again!' said Hamilton, steadily regarding him; 'I thought you were in Birmingham.'

'No, I have come back, and just in time, too!' was the half sullen, half fierce reply.

'In time to bid our friend good-bye, Dan,' said a third voice, opportunely, and Sam Challis came into the room, and made one more at this juncture.

'Ah! now he has done all the mischief he can,' said Dan, unceremoniously, 'he will go away and laugh at us. It is the fashion of fine gentlemen like him.'

Daniel Overdown did not attempt to disguise the state of his feelings. He was a bad hand at disguise; all his life he had had a habit of speaking out 'downright,' and it was too late in the day to affect a different fashion.

'What have I done to make you my enemy?'

asked Hamilton, calmly, as he sat down facing Overdown, with the table's width between them.

'You know.'

'I don't know,' was the reply. 'I have fancied till to-day that I had been your friend.'

'It's a friendship I don't care to hear about,' said Dan, roughly, 'or to thank you for.'

'Very well. As you please,' said Hamilton, more coolly.

'I would only thank you, and advise you to go,' Dan said, meaningly; 'just as you hinted that my company was hateful to you when we met in the inn parlour down at Grayling. Then you understood me better than I did you, and had the pull of me in consequence Now I read you like a book.'

'I am a book easily read,' said Hamilton, sadly; 'you can tell him everything, Sam, when I have got away from this place.'

'I know everything—I don't want Sam's version of the story,' cried Dan Overdown.

'What do you know?' asked Hamilton, sharply.

'That you love Aggie Challis—my girl!—the woman who has promised to be my wife,' roared Dan Overdown; 'you don't deny that to my face, I suppose?'

Hamilton turned pale, but his dark eyes gathered fire and defiance. After all, this was the rival who had supplanted him, and won Aggie from him—a man whom he must hate.

'No,' he said, glaring back at his questioner; 'I own it to your face. I love her—yes, a hundred times better than you do!'

'You dare to say it, then?' shouted Dan Overdown, philosopher, universal counsellor, humanitarian, and Christian no longer—only a poor fellow driven to fury by the words of this man confronting him, who had stolen Aggie's love from him, and left him a few shreds of her gratitude in its place.

'Why should I be afraid to own it?' raved Hamilton Redclove in his turn; 'what are you to me but a selfish hound, who would drag her to your level?'

'You have told me this before,' cried Dan.

'I tell it you again. It's the truth, which can't be hidden, and which shan't be. And I tell you once more, Dan Overdown,' he said, between his set teeth, 'that I love her awfully, that I hate you for being in my way, that she is everything in the world to me, and will be to the end of my life.'

'Damnation!'

There was a sudden plunge across the table at the man beyond it on the other side, a cry from Sam, a mad clutch of two excited men at each other's throats, the overturning of the table with a noisy crash, the lights going out and leaving all in darkness, with high voices and hard blows resounding through it, a heavy fall, and then a sudden awful stillness following.

It was all over in a minute, and the bursting open of the door by the excited landlord followed the conflict.

'What's the matter? what's the row? Good God! there's blood there on the floor!'

The light from the inner bar streamed through the open door into the room, and showed Hamil-

ton Redclove lying on the hearth-rug, still as death, with Daniel glaring down at him.

Sam stooped and put his hand upon the heart of the prostrate man. He looked up very quickly.

'Dan,' he said, 'you have killed him!'

CHAPTER IX.

IN DANGER.

DANIEL OVERDOWN came back to his senses, which a mad jealousy had stolen from him. He looked with horror from Sam Challis to the still form before which Sam was kneeling, and then said, in a low, stifled voice,

'Not so bad as that, for God's sake, Sam!'

'He don't breathe—I can't feel his heart beat,' replied Sam.

'This is a pretty state of things,' cried the aggrieved landlord, 'to have a murder in the house bang down on us, all of a sudden, in this silikin way!'

'Bring lights, and hold your row!' cried Sam, unceremoniously.

'He calls it murder,' gasped forth Dan Overdown; 'what can it mean—what will Aggie say—oh, what will she say? Doesn't he move at all?'

'No,' came back the dismal answer.

Lights were brought into the room, and the servants of the house came with them, and formed a crowd of white-faced, eager-eyed men and women.

'Some one run for a doctor,' said Sam; 'is there one in Ilvercombe?'

'There's one at Grayling.'

'Saddle a horse and go for assistance. Dan,' he said, in a low voice, and Dan leaned over him to hear what he had to whisper confidentially.

'Well?' he asked.

'You must cut, old friend; you must get away from here.'

'I am not used to running away,' answered the gunsmith, sturdily; 'if I've killed him, I'll wait for my arrest.'

'I fancy he breathes—faintly—but I would get away if I were you,' muttered Sam.

'Why?'

'It will spare my sister.'

'No—I can't bolt,' said Dan, returning to his chair; 'I will wait for the police—I would rather be hanged, if they want to hang me. It's all my fault; but how has he come to look like that, and be as low as that, already?'

'You fell with him—he has crushed in his skull against the iron fender.'

'It is his death-blow,' said Dan Overdown, with a groan.

'Ay—it looks like it,' responded the landlord, bending down to peer into the face of the senseless man lying on the hearth-rug; 'I mind the fall of young Collins at the hunt, six years ago—pitched clean off by the bridge yonder, and brought in here with his neck broke—you know, some o' ye? Well, he looked like that—hard and cold—exact.'

Daniel Overdown shuddered, and turned faint, for the first time in his life.

'Can I do anything, Sam?' he asked.

'No. Don't worry me. I understand this a

little—I have seen some ugly knocks abroad before to-day.'

'Which of you two did it?—and how did you do it?' asked the landlord, who was growing more curious.

'We will let you know presently,' said Sam.

'No; you had better know at once. I did it,' said Dan Overdown.

He got up from his chair, and walked unsteadily from the room into the dark front road outside the house. The cool, frosty air revived him somewhat, whilst he paced to and fro bareheaded. He crossed the road, after a while, to the bridge where young Collins, according to the landlord's story, had been thrown, and met death when he was as full of life and youth as Hamilton Redclove. The river was gurgling through the one arch which spanned it; the frost had given way of late days, and the ice was breaking up and floating with the current; he had looked at it that afternoon with very peaceful thoughts, and moralised concerning it. He had been prone to moralise all his life—for he had been over-wise and over-confident, with

a high opinion of that wisdom and confidence, born of the respect which men of his class had had for him. What was he, after all, but a noisy, blatant, quarrelsome mechanic, with tiger's blood in him when roused to madness by a few words, or an extra glass of drink. He had drunk hard by himself in that parlour, and all the good in him—God knows, he had tried to be good, and honourable, and fair-dealing!—had been crushed out of him by brandy. He had talked against drink hundreds of times before to-day—he had made converts, too—he had always counselled moderation in everything to his disciples, and no violent extremes. He had preached of patience and long-suffering—he had kept in check his fellow-men by his example and tact—and this was the end of it all. He had thought himself above his order until this night—now what would they say of him? What would Aggie Challis think? Poor Aggie!—poor unlucky girl, on whom the sunshine never fell, and whom he loved so much.

There was the noise of carriage-wheels advancing—coming on to the bridge where he

stood. It was a narrow bridge, and the coachman reined in his horses, and came over at a walking pace. Could this be the doctor already from Grayling—was there a road from Grayling in this direction as well as from Ilvercombe Park?

'Is the doctor inside there?' Dan cried, and the coachman stopped at his gestures, not understanding him.

'What do you say?'

'The doctor—do you bring him with you?'

The carriage window was lowered hastily, and an anxious face looked out—it was the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield's.

'Mr. Overdown—you! What has happened?' she inquired.

'Who is with you—in here?' he called out, sharply, as his keen eyes detected a second figure cowering in a corner of the carriage, 'not Aggie!'

'It is my daughter. We are going on to Upenham Junction—where the mail from London stops at midnight.'

'Going away—leaving *her*,' muttered Dan.

'My daughter will not remain at Ilvercombe, and I am accompanying her to town. I——But what has happened? Why are you waiting for the doctor? It is—oh, it is not anything that concerns us—not any more misery in this dreadful place! It cannot be!'

Daniel Overdown did not reply immediately—he knew not what to say to spare these two women the shock of the announcement.

'You must not think it is anything very serious,' he began, slowly, 'but Mr. Redclove——'

'Hamilton!' shrieked Estelle from the carriage, 'ah! you two have quarrelled—there is something dreadful at the inn. Mother, look at the people in the room, there—oh, let me out; let me out!'

She opened the carriage-door herself, and sprang into the roadway. Dan Overdown—for the second time that night—intercepted her again, and held her back with his strong hands.

'You must be careful, Miss Dangerfield, or you will kill him with your excitement.'

'He is in danger, then?'

'Yes—he is in danger.'

'Through you?'

'Yes,' he groaned, 'through me!'

Estelle waited for her mother to alight, and passed to her side with her hands linked upon her arm.

'It only wanted this,' he murmured, as they went slowly towards the inn, with Daniel Overdown following.

CHAPTER X.

RAMBLING.

HAMILTON REDCLOVE did not come back readily to consciousness. Even in his stupor he was obstinate, and lay for hours like the dead man which Sam Challis thought he was at first sight. The doctor came from Grayling when that worthy's arrival, to anxious hearts, seemed past all praying for. He pronounced upon the case, shook his head ominously, recommended great care, freedom from excitement, unremitting attention, and one or two extra impossibilities, ordered him to bed, and left his assistant to take care of him till the morning. He saw that Hamilton was conscious before

he departed—conscious, that was, of life about him, of noises in his ears, of bells and braying music, and a roaring as of the sea at his brain; but not conscious of the faces that bent over him, and looked into his, and tried hard to smile him into recognition of them. Only once he spoke, and that was to Estelle, who was looking tearfully through the chintz curtains at him.

'Aggie!' he cried; and Estelle drew back with a shiver, and went to the side of her mother.

'He calls her,' said Estelle Dangerfield; 'he is thinking of her even now!'

'He is wandering,' replied the mother.

'He is dying!' cried Estelle, giving way, and sobbing passionately on the mother's breast.

'Hush! you must be silent, dear, if you stop here and help me. Hamilton's life is in your hands.'

'Oh! if it were only in my power to save him,' she exclaimed.

'At any cost?' asked the mother, curiously.

'Ah! at any cost.'

'We must send for Miss Challis; it is our duty,' said the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield.

'Very well,' responded Estelle; 'but will he want to see her, do you think?'

'It is not unlikely, when he is conscious,' replied Frances Dangerfield; 'and she must be at hand.'

'If we could only get him back to Ilvercombe,' said Estelle, 'and away from this dreadful inn.'

'That is impossible.'

In the early morning, he fell off into a troubled sleep, when all who loved him, or cared for him, were in waiting downstairs, lest a change should come for the better, or the worse. Daniel Overdown did not intrude upon the watchers; he shunned Agnes Challis and the Dangerfields, and walked about the high road till the daylight. Sam found him, and asked if he would not come into the inn.

'Not yet. I shall be here, if they want me, and—if he does.'

'Aggie has been asking for you.'

He shuddered.

'I cannot face her yet. Let me alone, please,' was the fretful answer.

Later in the morning, there was a change in the patient. The doctor had arrived, and it seemed as if Hamilton had been waiting for him, and gathering consciousness by degrees, to ask about all these odd people who came and looked at him, and vanished away in the mist that floated over everything.

'I'm better,' he said to the doctor, confidently.

'I am very glad to hear it,' answered the doctor.

'I feel pretty well now,' he continued, in a very restless fashion; 'I am clear and cool. I know who you are—and Aggie. That is Aggie Challis, is it not?'

'Yes,' said Aggie, advancing from the background.

She had taken her place in that room as though it had been her right, and no one had gainsaid her—as though she had been this man's lover almost.

In this sore distress, the polite conventionalities of respectable society had gone woefully

to the wall. There would be time for the proprieties later on; but everybody seemed impressed by the conviction that Aggie's rightful place was at his side, to take her share of watching and consoling him.

'I am glad you are here, Aggie,' he said, with a grateful little sigh. 'I thought they would try to keep you away.'

'Oh! no,' was the answer.

'I want to see your husband—at once.'

'My husband!'

He stared at her rather wildly, and the doctor looked across at her not to contradict him.

'He will come presently,' she said, with ready tact. 'You are to rest now—to sleep.'

'I can't rest till I see him. And I might die in my sleep.'

'Of whom is he speaking?' whispered the doctor.

'Of Daniel Overdown, I think.'

'Put off the interview, if you can. Postpone it.'

But the patient was terribly obstinate in his

state of semi-consciousness, and grew excited with opposition.

'He must see him,' said the doctor.

'Thank you, thank you,' replied Hamilton, making an effort to shake hands with the doctor, and only resisting when the doctor put his hand on his to quiet him; 'you understand me better than all these dull people,' he added, most ungratefully.

When Daniel Overdown came, with slow steps, into the room, Hamilton regarded him with his new, half vacant expression.

'Is it you?' he inquired, doubtfully.

'Yes, it is I.'

'The man—who lives at Birmingham? I forget the name.'

'Overdown.'

'Overbrown—my uncle always called you—and it's a deuced queer name,' said Hamilton, hazarding a faint, unnatural laugh.

'What is it you want?' asked Dan; 'to hear me say how bitterly I regret all that has——'

'Not that. I wanted to see you—yes. I remember now. I wanted to say before I died that this was not your fault. He could not help it, sir,' turning to the doctor as to a judge who might convict Dan presently. 'I taunted him—I scoffed at him and his position; I drove him mad, for I was very mad myself. Where's Aggie?'

'I am here still,' she said.

'I thought you had gone,' he answered, 'and you must not leave me yet, if Dan don't mind. You will marry Dan all the same,' he said, forgetting that he had just spoken of her as the gunsmith's wife. 'I should be sorry to go away thinking I had parted you in any way. It was all my fault—and nobody to blame.'

'Will you try to rest?'

'Yes, I'll try. Tell that stupid old Fayre to keep his bells quiet, for my head aches.'

'Very well. Now shut your eyes, and try to rest.'

'I will, if you wish it, Aggie.'

He closed his eyes like an obedient child at her request, and in a few minutes was asleep. Aggie Challis remained at the head of the bed, Daniel Overdown withdrew, the Honourable Mrs. Dangerfield and Estelle followed the doctor to the room adjoining.

'He is getting well,' said Frances, eagerly; 'he will come round, sir?'

'I must have further advice,' answered the doctor, thoughtfully; 'he is in a most critical condition.'

'Not getting better!' murmured Estelle; 'and this is all my doing. It began from me. I have killed him!'

'She is his cousin, sir,' said Frances to the doctor, who was regarding Estelle with great surprise: 'you know how excited she is? You attended her at Grayling.'

'Of course—of course.'

'And he will recover—in time—you think?' asked Frances, anxious to commit the doctor to a fixed opinion before he went away—a ruse which it is the great effort in life of a doctor to dodge.

'I hope so, but he is in a very critical condition,' replied the medical attendant.

'That means he will die,' said Estelle, after the doctor had gone.

CHAPTER XI.

THE COUSINS.

The prophecy of Estelle Dangerfield seemed coming true next day, when Hamilton was battling with a higher fever, and knew not one of his friends. The 'further advice' had come in its carriage-and-pair, shaken its head over the patient, pronounced against him, unless there was a wondrous change within the next eight-and-forty hours, pocketed its fee, and departed. And for the next eight-and-forty hours three women and two men waited with a grave anxiety, and Lord Redclove sent a telegram with kind inquiries, and regrets that the gout had got into his knees, and put a stop to his locomotion for the present.

The change came in the two days—whether for the better it was difficult to determine, until the doctor came, and his opinion was still fenced round scrupulously by the possibilities and contingencies that might arise. The fever had quitted Hamilton, but it had taken all his strength with it, and left him like a little child; consciousness had returned, but with it an anxiety about his case which kept him very restless. Was he going to die? would the doctor tell him plainly if he were going to die or not? He only wanted certainty to be calm enough, he said, but the assurance of a fact, in one way or another, he must and would have.

They were alone together when Hamilton pressed the question, and the doctor said at last,

'I don't say you may not recover, Mr. Redclove, or that you are without one chance in your favour, but——'

He paused, and regarded his patient very deliberately. Hamilton did not shrink, or change colour, or look aghast at him. It was a bolder look at the world beyond this one than the

doctor had seen in many men lying so weak as he.

'But,' he continued, 'I would ask you to be prepared.'

'I think I am prepared,' answered Hamilton; 'I have done no man or woman any harm in my life, thank God, and I am not afraid to go.'

'That's well,' said the doctor. 'Mr. Fayre desired me to tell you——'

'Yes, I will see him presently. I have others to see first.'

'Indeed!'

'Quite a deputation,' he added, with a faint smile, 'for I have something on my mind.'

'You will not distress yourself?'

'Does it matter?'

The doctor did not reply until Hamilton repeated the question.

'Of course, anything of importance it would be right to communicate,' he said at last; 'but pray be calm with it, and keep others calm.'

'You may rely upon me.'

As the doctor was retiring, Hamilton called him back again.

'When I was very ill—in the beginning—I think I remember asking to see Dan Overdown. Is that correct?'

'Yes.'

'That's a man I wish to see again.'

'He will excite you—he——'

'No, he will not,' said Hamilton; 'I am past all excitement. I have not the steam in me.'

He tried hard to smile, and succeeded.

'I only wish to impress upon you the one fact that this was quite an accident. A little rough play, a scuffle, and a fall,' said Hamilton. 'Never mind what that foolish gunsmith chooses to call it in his grief—he never meant to hurt me.'

'I don't think he did,' replied the doctor. 'Good-morning; I shall come over in the evening to see how you are again.'

'Oh, then, you give me till the evening?' said Hamilton, shrewdly.

'Yes—certainly.'

'That is more time than I thought I should have,' he said; 'but may I begin at once? I should prefer it.'

The doctor returned to the bedside and felt his pulse.

'Wait an hour,' was the reply; 'you have been talking too much.'

'That's a fault I shall speedily atone for,' he said, in his old satirical way, and the doctor departed, thinking that Hamilton Redclove was a very singular young man.

Hamilton waited an hour patiently; then he sent for his cousins Frances and Estelle, who came in with anxious, wondering faces, on which were the marks of a grief impossible to hide. He regarded them attentively, almost critically, until they were standing by his bedside, looking down upon him.

'I haven't asked you two to come up here to receive my last dying speech and confession,' he said, with a lightness which jarred upon them terribly, 'so you must not depress me by your woful countenances just yet. Can you hear what I am saying?'

'Yes,' replied Frances.

'At three yards distant?'

'No.'

'It is hard to be reduced to a whisper when one wants to shout out, harder still to find one's shortness of breath in the way of a long talk—but, Estelle dear.'

Estelle leaned towards him quickly.

'I have a few words to say to your mamma which you must not hear; will you look out of that window for three minutes?'

'Shall I go away, cousin?'

'No; I want you in sight. And, Estelle——'

'Yes,' said Estelle, returning his long, earnest gaze at her.

'Are you friends with Aggie Challis?'

'Yes.'

'Keep so—pray keep so, for an old cousin's sake! For she is the one good woman I know.'

Estelle turned away to hide her tears, and went to the window, as suggested. Hamilton made a sign for Frances Dangerfield to put her head close to his pillow.

'I should like to think that all the mysteries are at an end before I go, Frances,' he said. 'Are you afraid of the truth still?'

'What truth?' she whispered back.

'Of the relationship between Agnes and Estelle.'

'I have not told her,' murmured his cousin.

'Tell her before your own time comes, Frances,' were his warning words, 'for it may be soon.'

'I have thought of this of late days, Hamilton,' replied Frances, in a lower tone—'of Estelle without me in the world, and of a sister's love that might be hers to comfort her and keep her strong. I will tell her, if you wish.'

'Thank you. I wish it.'

'My pride has sunk away in all this trouble. It is for the best, I think, now.'

'Will you tell Agnes Challis and Estelle the whole truth?' was Hamilton's next inquiry.

Frances looked at him doubtfully—nervously.

'What do you mean, Hamilton?' she said; 'I—I hardly—comprehend.'

'You have lately grown frightened of the truth, you know. You were a better woman—a more honourable woman—when I knew you first. Poor Frances!'

She shuddered, but she uttered not one protest against his verdict.

'And you have been less happy lately,' he continued—'is not that true?'

'Yes,' she confessed; 'heaven knows I have!'

'I should be glad if you would trust Aggie Challis and her brother—they are not hard-hearted or unjust, and they have not been treated well.'

'What shall I tell them?' asked Mrs. Dangerfield, as white now as the man whom she addressed—'what you wish I will do.'

'Tell them of the papers you found in your husband's safe, and destroyed in the study at Ilvercombe Park,' he whispered; 'assure them of their birthright.'

She covered her face with her hands, hiding herself away from his dark eyes.

'You knew it, then!—you knew it!' she exclaimed.

'I was in the park that night you went to the room; I climbed the ivy to see who was in the study, and where the blind was torn aside I peered in and saw *you!*'

'And yet——'

'And yet I was silent—for the family credit, I suppose,' he said, mockingly; 'but I had thought that with the restitution of the money the secret might remain, for your sake and Estelle's, until the shame of it, and the sin of it, have come close to me lying here. Now—all the truth—for honour's sake, and heaven's.'

'What will they say—and do?' she asked.

'Trust them both.'

'I will do this,' she replied, more boldly. 'God knows, Hamilton, it has been an awful weight upon my conscience, and I have grown grey struggling to bear it. And—those papers—I have not destroyed them. I was not wicked enough for that—even at my worst.'

'I am glad to hear it,' he said; 'and now, God bless you, cousin, and bring you peace of mind—as He will!'

'Ah!' she answered, 'as He only can.'

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST OF IT.

HAMILTON REDCLOVE had borne well the ordeal of the interview between him and his cousins, but it taxed the little strength that was left in him.

'I must take care, Frances,' he said to the widow; 'I must wait a little while before I see the others. It's some hours till night still.'

'What then?' asked Frances.

'Daniel Overdown and—Aggie. I am very anxious—about them.'

'Why?'

He did not answer. He closed his eyes, as if to intimate that the subject was ended, and Frances did not seek to tire him with her questions. She and her daughter stole from the

room, and left him to his rest, and it was not till the afternoon that he was again busy with his inquiries. They were all for Agnes Challis and Daniel Overdown—he wished to see them at once—and he betrayed suddenly a nervous haste that to those who listened to him seemed ominous.

Aggie and her betrothed were standing by his bed presently with the door shut on them. He motioned to Agnes to stand more closely by the bedside, with the dark, rugged face of Dan Overdown near her.

He looked at Aggie almost cheerfully, as he said,

'You two have been told, I daresay, that I am not likely to last the day out?'

They did not answer, save that their silence was an answer to him.

'That clears away the ground, you see,' he whispered, in the same light tone, 'and saves explanation. Well, Aggie,' turning to her, 'I wish you to understand, as I have tried to make the rest of them, that it was all my fault, and none of this good fellow's doing. I did my

best—or worst—to madden him, and I succeeded.'

'I take the blame upon myself,' muttered Dan. 'I will have no excuse for me. I accept the consequences.'

'Consequences of a mere accident, you silly fellow,' said Hamilton, 'there, shake hands with me.'

Dan put his rough hand in the sick man's.

'Is this forgiveness?' Dan Overdown asked, hoarsely.

'I have nothing to forgive, man.'

'Yes, you have,' said Dan, 'for I tried to kill you.'

'With an old-fashioned iron fender. What an instrument of malice!' he replied, and with his strange satire evident once more.

'Well, forgiveness then. You must not mind, Aggie,' Hamilton added, turning to her again, 'what he says in his despair. That is a good fellow, to be thought of, and to be loved, always.'

'But,' began Dan, when a look of Hamilton's checked him.

'Let me go on, Dan,' entreated the sick man, 'let me have it all my own way now. Just for once! You are looking very grave, Aggie!' he said.

'Don't mind me, oh, don't mind me,' Aggie Challis pleaded.

'Lying here, I have had a dread that you two might separate, or misunderstand each other for all time to come, without a word or two of mine before I went away,' he continued, 'and you must not do that.'

'We understand each other, Mr. Redclove,' said Agnes, 'pray leave the rest to us, and think no more of him or me.'

'You have not quarrelled?' was his anxious question.

'No.'

'Do you love him less than you did?' he asked, curiously.

'No,' said Agnes, frankly; and 'Heaven bless you, girl,' Daniel Overdown burst forth with.

'You will not mind, then—and I am sure Dan will not mind—my telling you how much I

loved you,—how I strove to keep it down and hide it away for my poor pride's sake, seeing with every day more clearly what a foolish affection it was. I say this not to distress you, Aggie, God forbid, and so don't give way and tremble so, but I offer it as the excuse for the quarrel I had with Dan last week. It was not malice or bad temper, only a passion that had despaired of you, and was preying on itself. It is your forgiveness I want badly,' he exclaimed.

'I won't have this,' cried Dan, 'she has nothing to forgive you. There is no one to blame but myself, and you are a mistaken man, I tell you, sir.'

'I do not see what you mean,' Hamilton murmured, 'but my eyes are very misty now.'

'Well, I mean she loves you,' said Dan, boldly, and yet very sorrowfully, 'and I am NOT the man she cared for.'

'Aggie, is this true? Can it be near the truth in any way,' Hamilton asked, eagerly, 'don't, at the last like this, be hard with me.'

She bent her head down till it touched his, and whispered back,

'It is all true, Hamilton, I couldn't help it! I tried to keep my word to Dan, to fancy you never liked me, but——'

'Well, well,' Hamilton said, impatiently.

'But,' she concluded, in a tone lower than his own, 'I loved you very much.'

There was a long silence after this, which Hamilton was the first to break.

'I am very happy,' he murmured, 'I shall die happily, too, but oh! this poor fellow here with life before him, I had forgotten him.'

'Don't mind me, sir,' said Dan Overdown, with lips that quivered a little as he spoke, 'I shan't lose sight of her, or hope for her.'

'She will want friends,' said Hamilton, in reply.

'Not if you live, and then——'

'Not if I live!' echoed Hamilton, despairingly at last.

'Whilst there's life there's hope, and such a big lump of hope for you that's worth the trial,' cried Dan.

'Ah, yes,' said Hamilton, with a sigh.

'And if you live there will be hope for me too and no crime upon my conscience.'

'Hope?'

'Somewhere abroad,' continued Dan, thoughtfully, 'until I could come back one day, and find you two together, and be strong enough to say, "God bless you both" with all my heart.'

'This is a true man,' whispered Hamilton to Aggie; 'will you not marry him—presently?'

'No, Hamilton, I cannot,' she replied; 'he knows I cannot. I will be his friend, sister, child, but never his wife. Don't ask me.'

'Very well,' said Hamilton, easily resigned to this, at all events. 'Now, will you kiss me, dear, before I try to sleep? For you are mine, till I go away for good, Aggie!'

She kissed him gently, and tried to smile back at him through her tears, but it was a desperate effort in that hour of trial. She might have given way then—for she was very weak—had not the doctor entered at this juncture.

'Come, come,' he said, advancing, 'we must not have too much of this. I must interfere with my authority.'

He looked steadily at his patient, stooped, and peered more closely at him, felt his pulse,

put his head on his chest, and listened to the beating of his heart.

'Well?' said Hamilton.

'Well,' echoed the doctor, 'you are no worse. Talking seems to agree with you, although we will have no more of it to-day.'

'No worse!' said Agnes.

'Just a trifle better, I am disposed to think,' he replied.

'Then there is hope!' cried Agnes.

Agnes and the doctor were at the door then, and the doctor said, with his old cautiousness and his old catch-word,

'He is in a very critical condition. He is not out of danger, but I don't think—he is—entirely—without hope.'

'Not now!' said Daniel Overdown, who had followed them.

And Hamilton was not, for hope came back to him and his friends after some days further battling with his weakness. Life at last seemed brightening for him and Aggie Challis, as it should do in real life at times, and for real lovers; leaving not all the happiness in the

world for the end of pleasant story-books.

This was later on, when Frances Dangerfield had found courage to keep her word, and discovered that the Challises were not hard to her, when Estelle and Aggie knew that they were sisters, and Estelle's jealousy seemed to vanish strangely with the waking to the truth; when all were friends, and enemies were nowhere; when Sam Challis, or Samuel Dangerfield, Esq., seemed disposed to settle down in England, and make love to Bella Fayre; and when Daniel Overdown stole away one day in early spring, and was seen of no man for long years.

That day followed some weeks after the confession at the bedside. Hamilton was strong then, and walking, in the sunshine, on the terrace of Ilvercombe Park, with Aggie by his side. He was not too weak to walk without support, the doctor said; so his arm was naturally round the waist of the heiress. The two were very happy, and very forgetful. They had forgotten Daniel Overdown's existence, until the gunsmith suddenly came up the steps

of the terrace, turned very white, and stopped as if shot by one of his own rifles.

'Dan,' cried Aggie, quickly, and with the red blushes on her cheeks, 'will you walk with us a little way?'

'We have something of great importance to tell you, old friend,' said Hamilton, looking into Aggie's face, and laughing, almost hysterically, at his own bliss—or at the promise of it which he had gained that day from her affection.

Dan Overdown stared at them both, and then smiled strangely.

'Yes—I see,' he said, drily; 'give me a little time, though. I'll be back presently.'

He went down the broad terrace steps into the green grass of the park, and on under the trees into the shadows that were there. When they saw him again his beard was long and grey, and there were half-a-dozen laughing children round the knees of the only woman on whom he had ever set his heart.

THE END.

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